Marty
'95

A Note From the Publisher....

This is *Quest Productions, Inc.* (home of *Quest Magazine*) first venture into the Fanzine market. Primarily we are a resource for the live-action role-playing gaming community, providing players with a listing of games running in the Northeast (where we are based) and reviews of games, game systems and places to find gaming supplies (like rule books, costuming needs, etc.)

Our company is based in North Brunswick, NJ (very near Rutger's University) and our quarterly publication is available for $10/year subscription rate. We were at Media West Con 15 (1995's convention) passing out a free mini version of *Quest* and doing a special offer to introduce our 'Zine to fandom.

Our special offer went over so well we were SOLD OUT (!) by Saturday and spent the last 2 days of the Con taking orders and meeting with fans. All in all, *Quest Press's* first ever Media West was such a success we hope to be able to return in 1996!

Now...our special offer. If you are reading this Fanzine, chances are you got it through the offer we made first at Media West. This Fanzine came with a CERK Radio T-shirt (for those not completely hip to *Forever Knight*, CERK Radio is the station where LaCroix does his Nighterawler radio show). The idea to sell a *Forever Knight* Fanzine with a related product (the T-shirt) came from the manic mind of Ron the Enforcer, the *Forever Knight* Internet Listserv's only "Enforcer" member and ***die-hard*** fan of the show. If you are on FORKNI-L, chances are you ran into one of Ron's postings.

If by some quirk you purchased this 'Zine by itself (either because you had a CERK shirt already and only wanted the 'Zine or because you are not a T-shirt type of person) all we have to say is **thank you!** We also ask that if you have any comments about the artwork or the story that you let us know via Email at Questinc@aol.com or the *snail mail* route at PO BOX 84 Franklin Park, NJ 08823-0084

We are planning another Fanzine - a *big* one that would include several stories and a LOT more art! Deadline for story submissions is October 1st. The Fanzine is entitled ***In the Heat of the Knight*** and we are looking for stories that focus on the *cop* side of Nick's life and stories that show him using his vampire talents to solve crimes and catch the bad guys (like he does on TV!). Stories rated "R" for violence and language are fine ***NO "/"*** (that's "no slash"!) If you don't know what "slash" is then you probably don't write that sort of fiction. However sex falling into the "R" category is fine. This Fanzine will be making it's debut at ECLECTICON '95 in October.

The story *Training Mission* is by Ron the Enforcer and the ***wonderful*** cover art is by Nelson Marty. Nelson does commission work and he can be reached via the Email and *snail mail* address listed above for *Quest*.

Thank you for reading this and **enjoy the story!**

The Editorial Staff
Quest Press

PROLOGUE

The story is based on events that happened on the Internet during the summer of 1994. On FKFIC-L (the fiction Listserv) we fans did a round robin "Forever Knight" tale that was dubbed the "Forever Knight War 2". All of us portrayed ourselves in a world where Nick, Janette, LaCroix, et. al REALLY existed and, depending upon our personal tastes, we were the friends or allies of the character we liked best (or knew them ALL if we were "Die Hard" fans!)

So, during this "War", a mortal follower of LaCroix, John Dencoff, had the misfortune of being transformed into a Vampire through the magick of a tome known as the Aberat. No one really knew what to do with him and, of course, he wound up at Nick's loft and was looked after by the Knighties (Nick's followers) for a time until an Enforcer showed up at Nick's door!

This Enforcer (*Moi*, in case you haven't guessed!!) was drawn there for two reasons (1) because of the newly made vampire who was created by magick, instead of the usual means and (2) to insure the "Warring" factions didn't violate The Code. I didn't stay long - I departed after a day or so with John in tow. The story, "Training Mission" picks up shortly after John comes to stay with his Enforcer mentor. Ron had brought John home with him intending to teach him about life as a Vampire but he soon found out that even the best laid plans of mice and Enforcers often go awry....!

Training Mission
by
Ron "the Enforcer" Katz

John Dencoff reached into the refrigerator for yet *another* bottle of blood. Copying a certain other vampire's style, he bit the cork off with his teeth but broke with Knightly tradition by drinking the stuff straight out of the bottle. He had been constantly hungry since he was brought across via the magick of the Abarat. John was wondering when, if ever, the *need* would ever cease or, at least, get controllable. So far, the only good thing he got out of his current state of being was that it cured his battle of the bulge. John had lost the "love handles' that he'd been battling before The Change and, when he looked at himself in the mirror, he saw a handsome dark haired college man whose athletic build made him seem more of a jock than the serious student he truly was. However, he *liked* his new look. Women didn't go for the "brainy" types - they liked the ruggedly handsome outdoorsy-looking guys and, right now, he fit the mold of what the women (at least the ones that he had encountered) wanted.

Not that he had had much of a social life since coming to live with The Enforcer. He'd been holed up in a small two bedroom apartment in Northern New Jersey since he left Toronto in July and, with August drawing to a close, he was still no closer to having the answers he thought the Enforcer would give him. The mysterious Ron (not his birthname, of that John was sure, since the Enforcers were mostly made up of very Ancient vampires) was hardly ever around. The refrigerator was well-stocked, so John wouldn't be tempted to feed on the neighbors, and there were lots of books, tapes, the TV, and, of course America On-line (he had the Enforcer's password to get onto the Internet) to keep him amused. However, despite all of this, John was beginning to think he made a huge mistake.

"I feel like the *Karate Kid*," he thought as he sat down to watch the rest of that movie. "I don't think reading Larry Niven books or watching old movies is going to teach me how to be a vampire. At least the chores Mr. Miyagi gave Daniel were designed to teach him something," John fumed aloud to himself. "I swear if I have to sit though *Lost Boys* one more time...!"

The angered thought was cut short by the sound of the door opening hesitantly as though whoever was there was having trouble with the lock. John felt an odd tingling and suddenly knew what lay on the opposite side of the door. Three others, like himself, and one of them was hurt. When he opened the door, his mentor and two men he had never met before entered the room. The two men held the Enforcer between them and were carrying the barely conscious vampire into the living room. Ron's shirt was shredded and covered with blood and the Enforcer's eyes were glazed gold. John thought he looked like he'd been hit by a machine gun or worse and watched as Ron was laid out on the sofa.

"What happened?" John asked.

"Don't just stand there gawking, boy! Get the medkit!" one of the Vampires ordered not answering John's question.

John hesitated only a second; The moment his eyes met those of the Vampire who had spoken to him, he was *compelled* to obey the order he'd been given. He didn't realize he'd been doing something he'd been made to do until he was handing the strange Vampire Ron's paramedic bag.

Then it hit him. And he was pissed! He would have helped! Who the hell did this guy think-

<Calm down.>

John's eyes snapped towards the wounded Enforcer. He recognized the voice in his head. Ron had done this before, the Mind Speech he had called it, saying it was the only way two Vampires could converse privately in the presence of others of their kind.

<Can't they hear us?> John sent back.

<I am shielding the transmission so they can't.>

The Sending stopped as the Vampire tending Ron's wounds withdrew a rather large slug from his charge. The bullet - what there was of it - looked huge and was very oddly shaped.

"What is that?" John asked.

"A Kindred Killer," the man answered. "These bullets were designed to destroy Vampires."

"I thought-"

"We can stand up to normal bullets," the second man, whose accent made John look at him with interest for he sounded like the classic Dracula. The Romanian accent was unmistakable to someone who had been doing nothing but watching old vampire movies for the past month. However, the second Vampire didn't look anything like the brooding Balkan price of darkness from those old films. John listened intently as the foreign Vampire continued to explain, "But not something designed to explode with an incendiary charge the minute it penetrates our flesh. These bullets were like mini Napalm bombs - it's a miracle your Sensei survived."

Now that he had a better look at Ron's injuries, it DID look like he'd been hit by something that exploded and flamed him from the inside burning out. Ron was in a lot of pain but was doing an incredible job of not showing it...much. He shot John a look and John knew exactly what he wanted.

He came back from the kitchen in a heartbeat and handed Ron the bottle. The foreign Vampire took it from him as his partner barked, "Wait until I'm done with you. There's an unexploded shell still in your stomach."

"Shit!" the Enforcer fumed as he turned away from the man tending him. He looked at the foreign Vampire saying, "Dragutin, I need a drink!"

"Not until we get all of this out of you! Besides, we're not supposed to feel pain, remember?"

"Fuck you, Garret!" Ron spat turning away from the long-haired man in the black duster who was tending his wounds. He looked at Dragutin, who was aiding the vampire Garret by tending to the wounds on Ron's side and back.

Dragutin laughed softly under his breath. It was obvious to John (from more sensed than spoken or viewed things) that Dragutin and Ron were old friends. The third man, Garret, was probably the Enforcer's partner. John had gleaned enough from his time with Ron to know the Enforcers usually went into the field in teams of two. However, it didn't look to John like Ron and his partner cared much for one another. But, then again, it was really hard to tell what sort of relationship the two men had under the circumstances....

However, with Dragutin and Ron, it was easy to see they did like each other. But the two friends were as different in personal style as night and day. Dragutin look was *very* hip and artistic; He had a section of his head shaved close and the rest had his long flowing black hair cornrowed into braids that were adorned with gemstones, skulls and other occultish items. He wore what John had dubbed the "Gothic Punk Uniform" - loose fitting black pants tucked into leather boots, a black silk shirt over which was the ubiquitous black duster. And, of course, LOTS of witchy jewelry - pentacles, ankhs, etc. everywhere. He was very good looking (John was beginning to wonder if there was such a thing as an ugly Vampire) with sharp features that had a definite Slavic line to them and he also had the air of danger about him.

Ron, like his partner Garret, was dressed more Yuppie but, unlike Garret, Ron's chestnut hair was cut in a layered style that helped to soften the lines of his angular face. The hair was on the long side but it wasn't below the collar of his Armani jacket. He had been in very stylish suit by said designer until whoever shot him shredded it beyond repair and he had been wearing one of those Calvin Klein shirts that were designed to make ties superfluous. His trademark tinted aviator glasses were off and John saw Ron's eyes were glowing red from a combination of *the Hunger* and pain.

"Are you an Enforcer?" John asked Dragutin.

"No," he replied. "I leave the getting shot at to the people who've got the stomach for it."

Ron winced more at the bad joke than at the pain and John rolled his eyes. Changing the subject, John asked, "Who did this?"

"Good question," Dragutin said as he placed the last of the shells he pulled from Ron's back into the receptacle dish and began cleaning the wounds.

"Are you two done yet?" Ron demanded.

Garret shot his partner a hard look. "I don't know why I let Lavinia talk me into working with you. The way you carry on, it's like you have a death wish!" He put the slug he had removed from Ron's belly adding in a less hostile tone, "Okay, so you saved my neck out there, I'll give you that. But grandstanding like that-"

"Enough," Dragutin interrupted softly. "Garret, I'll look after him. Make your report to The Ancient."

Ron's partner rose with a heavy sigh. "Yeah, okay. You were always better at keeping him out of trouble. If only because you could zap some sense into his thick skull!"

Dragutin smiled slightly at this and Ron growled softly under his breath. John grinned. It was amusing to see the interplay between Ron and his friends. He knew his mentor had a life but had never had the opportunity to see much of it until now.

Garret departed leaving Ron in the care of Dragutin and John. Dragutin handed his old friend the bottle saying, "Take it slow. I don't want these holes sealing up before I clean all traces of the incendiary out of you. It'll only take a few more minutes to irrigate these wounds."

Ron was in full vampire mode - red eyes, fangs out, the works. John backed away. He looked almost demonic and John wondered if he looked that way whenever he manifested. The Enforcer had caught his pupil's nervous look and managed to calm himself enough so that his eyes were the only unusual thing - and they were

just their usual gold color - which didn't look very threatening but did look a bit odd.

<I'll be all right.>

John met his mentor's eyes as the feathery touch of the other man's mind reached out to brush against his own.

<How bad is it?>

<I'll live.> Ron replied his eyes glinting red in with the gold from pain.

<Not funny. Be serious.> John insisted.

<I'll be okay by tomorrow night. After Dragutin is done patching me up we'll talk. Really talk.>

John nodded and sat down on a nearby chair to wait for Dragutin to be finished bandaging up Ron. John knew that by the next night Ron wouldn't have so much as a scratch to show for this night's pain but, until the wounds sealed themselves, he would need the wrapping to keep the holes covered and clean. He helped Dragutin carry Ron to one of the two bedroom and they laid him down on the bed. He was stripped of his ruined clothes and given a pair of sweatpants to wear. Ron winced a bit as he dressed himself in his old gym clothes but, once done, he looked composed and relaxed.

As Dragutin threw Ron's destroyed suit into the garbage, the Enforcer said, "Figures I'd get trashed by the bad guys when I'm wearing something decent."

Dragutin grinned. "It's not like you can't afford to replace it."

"My credit isn't what it used to be and you know it," Ron said suddenly very serious. "That's why I'm here, remember?"

His friend sighed saying, "Well, you will get it all back....in time. Your sentence wasn't to last forever."

"It only *feels* like fucking forever!" Ron growled eyes glowing in response to his seething anger. "I could deal with being punished by the Ancients if I deserved it! But I did not do what I was accused of doing!"

"I know you are innocent. I would not have stood by you at the Inquest if I had any doubts. But I am only one person. There were too many who wanted to see you destroyed. Divia had many friends."

"And even more enemies," Ron put in. "It was one of them that killed her, not me. She went up in an explosion! Not my MO, that's for sure! I wouldn't off someone in so sloppy and obvious a fashion."

"Yes, but she had been completely drained so she would be immobilized and helpless before she'd been detonated which, unfortunately, *IS* your MO. You have killed enemies by draining them to the point of unconsciousness and leaving them to be claimed by the sun."

Ron turned away and stood staring sightlessly out of the window for a long moment. John knew vaguely about Divia - the very young vampiress who had given Ron the Dark Gift - but the name was only spoken in passing. The Enforcer was a killer - it was part of the job - but he knew enough from what little he'd been told that killing another vampire in cold blood brought down the same penalties that murder had in the mortal world.

Did Ron kill his Sire? John couldn't be sure but from what he was *feeling* he didn't think his mentor was guilty of that crime. Was he set up to take the fall for another? That one would be hard to prove. He wasn't a detective but John knew someone who was and he was now starting to wish he'd left Nick's company on better terms....

"You'd better rest now," John heard Dragutin say to Ron and, when he looked over at Dragutin, the vampire added to him, "Keep him off his feet, John. And make sure he gets plenty to eat. He's going to need it."

John nodded and he waited until after he heard the front door close behind Dragutin before he approached Ron. "What's going on?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"If you're being framed-"

Ron turned on him like a cat on an unsuspecting mouse, "You know nothing of it! Mind your own business, boy!"

John was back against the wall eyes wide in fright before he realized what had happened to him. For those few heartbeats his mentor had spoken, it sounded as though he had the thunder of the old gods in his voice and Zeus's lightning in his eyes. John had been - for those instants anyway - terrified of this man. He couldn't speak or move and the feeling of paralyzation didn't pass until the second Ron turned his gaze away from him to go back to staring out the window.

"What did you do to me?" John whispered after a long pause.

Ron sighed heavily. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, gently. "I know you only were trying to help. But there isn't anything you can do for me. The die is cast and I must do what I am bound to do."

John tried to move and found - happily - that he could. He returned to his mentor's side. "What did you do to me?" he asked again.

"I didn't *do* anything. I just...let my defenses down for an instant," Ron explained. He met John's curious gaze and smiled slightly. "There's a lot about me you don't know."

"Then tell me."

Ron sighed heavily turning away. He went back to the bed and sat. John followed him and sat beside him looking at him and asking again.

<Tell me.>

Ron looked at him and smiled slightly. *<You learn quick.>*

<I want to learn. That's why I came here with you. Why haven't you shown me anything? What's wrong?>

"I'm what's wrong," Ron stated aloud. You should be with...someone else."

"I don't-"

"John, hanging around me will not do your reputation with The Community any good. You wanted to know what I did to you? I let down my guard. I let you really see me as I truly am."

"What are you?"

"An Ancient, John. Like LaCroix, the one you were with when the Abarat brought you across. He and I are both old Romans, made within decades of each other, and we are alike in more ways than I would care to tell and that you would like to know."

John couldn't believe what he was hearing. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, he thought. But what was an Ancient doing working for the Enforcers?

Ron picked up the unasked question and responded, "I was bound to serve the Ancient Lavinia as one of her Enforcers as punishment for killing Divia. She forced me to be Bound to her and she will not break the Blood Tie until my sentence is over."

"How long?"

"A century and a day."

"Oh, shit...!"

John got up and walked a few steps away. "How much time-"

"A lot," was all Ron would say. "And I brought you here because Lavinia is interested in you. She hasn't seen one made by the Abarat in centuries. She thinks you'd make the perfect agent. You cannot be felt the way the others can. No one gets the buzz, the odd feeling I know you have felt in the presence of another vampire. When I was brought in tonight, I didn't know if you were home or not. I didn't feel you there."

"But yet you can still do Mind Speech with me. How is that?"

"The first time I tried it, we were here face to face and I could see you to

make the initial connection. After that, I knew what to look for, so finding you mentally would not be a challenge for me. Every man's mind is different - like everyone's fingerprint is different - so using Mind See to look for you would be the only way another of our kind could detect you and that is saying they know the touch of your mind. Without ever having made the initial contact like I did when I first taught you the Mind Speech, you would not be traceable in that fashion."

"And not giving off the buzz-"

"You are invisible to Vampires and thus would be the perfect Enforcer. No Codebreaker would ever sense you coming and, if you become the sort of agent Lavinia has in mind, the poor fool would meet the Final Death before he had a chance to guess at what had hit him."

John's mind reeled at what the implications of all this was. This Lavinia wanted him to be her T-1000, her perfect killing machine. He knew killing to survive is what Vampires had to do but becoming an assassin was another story. He was not going to be a hit man. This Lavinia, whoever the hell she was, would have to find herself another prospect because he was getting out and getting out now!

"Look, it's been real cool, but I'm outta here!" John said as he headed for the door.

Ron caught his arm before he had gone two steps. "You can't walk out. This place is watched and you will be followed. Lavinia knows her Bond is strong enough to hold me but you are still free and that is why this place is watched. You would be spotted and taken before you had a chance to stray very far."

"But I don't want to be this Lavinia's assassin!"

"I understand but you must face a certain reality here. You can refuse to comply with what she wants and be forced to obey as I have been or agree and bide your time until you are strong enough to break away and go where you know she has no power. Lavinia's reach is not worldwide, there are places you can go and I'll let you know where they are when the time comes. We both are her prisoners but, if we are wise, we will survive and learn and use this knowledge to help us in the future."

"Knowledge is power," John quoted.

"Exactly."

"But if I do agree, won't she be suspicious and do to me what she did to you anyway?"

"Maybe, but there is a way to prevent her from Bonding you," Ron explained. "However, if you do this Ritual and are made to Bond with her, you will have to be a very good actor to convince her she has you or you are history. Lavinia distrusts magic and it is through the magic of a Ritual found in the Great Grimoire that you can be made Unbondable."

"What do I have to do?"

"It's what I must do. Getting access to the Great Grimoire will require my calling in some old favors but it will be worth it. I'd rather have my new partner be a free man than Lavinia's puppet."

"Your partner?"

Ron smiled. "Yes. Garret has had his fill of me. It is time for a change...."

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"Yeah, Nick Knight. I'm either asleep or incommunicado..."

"Itaina!" ("Ouch!" in Japanese)

Nick growled at the phone from where he lay on the sofa. It was barely noon and he'd gotten in late last night - almost too late for he'd been caught overtime on a crime scene in Little Tokyo and was forced to hide in his Caddy's trunk to escape being solar fried.

Nat had convinced one of the uniforms to take his car back to 101 Gateway Lane and he sneaked out of the trunk and into the house the moment he was sure it was safe to do so.

He sighed heavily as he sat up. He did not want to be up now. And it had nothing to do with his being a vampire. He had eight cases outstanding and had been putting a lot of overtime trying to find something anything that would help him put the pieces together.

"Wake up, Knight!" He heard Schanke say more in jest than in earnest. "We got another one. That makes three this week. Nat thinks she might have something for us by tonight. Enjoy your beauty sleep - god knows you need it! Bye!"

"*Pu Sai*!" ("You stink!" in Japanese)

Nick rolled over and rubbed his eyes. His head ached and he just was beginning to realize he'd been speaking Japanese the whole time he'd been venting his frustrations at the early call.

He smacked himself in the face, "English! English!" he commanded his wearied brain but he still kept seeing kanji instead of Arabic lettered words. The pile of notes he'd taken last night in Little Tokyo wasn't helping much for none of it was in English. "I must be working too hard," he thought to himself, "If I can't even remember what country I'm in!"

Nick looked back at the notes. Schanke had said there was now a third victim. Great. Three people all killed by bullets that blow them up from the inside out. The first two victims could have been scooped up with a spatula - there was so little left of them. The third...?

He was suddenly wide awake and wished he could head over to the precinct to find out what's up. It was times like these when it really sucked to be a vampire!

Nick grabbed the phone and dialed Schanke's line. "Schanke, what appened?"

"Good morning to you, too!" he teased then quickly sobered stating, "Found a third one, or at least we think it's a number three. Not much left of whoever it was. This time it looks like the killer decided to do a bang and burn."

"A what?"

"Ah, that's what they're calling it around here. Guy pops the victim and then sets the body on fire to get rid of the remains. There was nothing left of the body except ashes and some shredded clothing."

"Great. Get the report back from ballistics?"

"Not yet but we should have it by the time you're due in. Unless you're thinking of coming by early....?"

"Not this early ," Nick said then added, "The strength of coffee I'd need to keep conscious at this point in time has yet to be been invented."

"Wanna bet? You should have a swig of what's in this pot. It would put hair on your chest."

"I want to be awake, not furry, Schanke," Nick teased.

"Eat some chocolate! Caffeine plus sugar will really get you up."

"You wouldn't want to see me on a sugar rush," Nick said starting to have fun with this line of conversation. "Let's face it, real cops live on caffeine and adrenaline."

"Now we know the real reason why the Knight never eats!"

"Yep!" Nick agreed merrily.

"I was right. You *are* strange! I'll see you later," Schanke said and rang off.

Nick hung up still smiling. Sometimes it was fun to add to the mystery that was Nick Knight. He was feeling a little peckish, so he loped over to the refrigerator and poked his head in. He had the usual in bottles and some of Natalie's protein concoction to choose from.

Natalie was still convinced it was the blood that was keeping him a vampire but Nick wasn't so sure of that theory anymore. Especially when the results of a DNA scan Nat did on him recently showed him to be different genetically from

humans - that would mean he was a different species of being. And he hadn't heard of any cases where a species changed into a different one simply by eating differently.

But he grabbed the bottle full of protein shake anyway and poured himself a glassful. What the hell? It couldn't hurt and it didn't taste half bad - when it stayed down. Besides, Natalie was trying to help him and the least he could do was be a good little guinea pig and go along with her experiments, since he really didn't have any ideas of his own to go on at this point.

However, he did have a few ideas as far as last night's murder was concerned. And the other one the day before. But, as he went over his notes, what clinched everything in his mind was what Schanke had told him about Victim Number Three. Nothing left but shredded clothing and ashes. It was day when the body was found, that was why there was nothing but ashes left. The victims had all been vampires, of that Nick was sure but to have to deal with a Hunter after all these decades....

The phone rang startling him and Nick answered.

"Knight here."

"Uh, Nick....I don't know if you remember me and I'm sorry to bother you during the day but I felt I owed you for helping me out like you did when I was first brought across...."

"Who is this?"

"John. John Dencoff. I was with LaCroix-"

Nick stiffened at the mentioning of the Master's name and interrupted John saying, "I know who you are. What do you want?"

"To warn you. The Enforcers are coming up to Toronto. They are after the Hunter who is killing our people. My mentor thinks the murders he read about in Toronto, the ones where the victims were blown apart, were done by this Hunter he's after."

"So he's coming up here?"

"With me, yes."

"So, you've become one of them now," Nick stated not able to keep the contempt out of his voice.

"Not exactly. I know you'll find this hard to believe but Ron's not all that bad. He's not LaCroix. He's different. I'll explain everything when I get there."

He hung up without saying good-bye but Nick's acute hearing picked up the sound of a door opening in whatever room John had been in while making his call. He was probably trying to warn me without letting the Enforcer know what he was doing, Nick surmised.

He recalled his last meeting with John's mentor and it hadn't been a pleasant interaction. Ron (not his real name, because the Enforcer, like most vampires, assumed MANY identities over their lifetimes) had breezed into town looking to have fun at the expense of a lot of people Nick cared about. He had also wanted John, who had been brought across through some accidental magic involving the Aberat and, to some extent, LaCroix. Well, Ron got John and left and everyone was glad to see them go. Well, they were glad to see the Enforcer go, but not John. John's name still came up every so often when talk of the "feud for fun" that happened that past July occurred.

Now John was coming back with the Enforcer to help him hunt a Hunter. Nick had seen how the Enforcers worked in the past but he got the strangest feeling that, somehow, this time was going to be different....

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"Who were you talking to?" Ron demanded as he peeled off his shoulder holster not bothering to remove the guns that the rig kept tucked neatly under his arms. He'd gone into the field that day(!) armed for bear but from the looks of things (and his bad mood) John knew the Enforcer had come up empty.

"Someone who may be able to help us once we get to Toronto."

"You mean Knight?" Ron queried almost contemptuously. "Screw him!! I won't work with someone who has turned his back on The Community. He wants no part of us, remember? He wants to be mortal!"

"He's a cop. You are out of your jurisdiction in Canada. We need Nick's help."

"Maybe," Ron allowed. "But I don't need to hear him whining about how fucked up his life is. His angst-ridden diatribes make me want to puke."

"I'll keep him focused on the case," John promised.

"See to it that you do. If he goes off just once on one of his pathetic little tangents, I personally will drain his sorry ass and leave him for the sun to claim. I don't want to hear it! I'm in no mood for his shit. LaCroix has spoiled him. He lets Nick get away with this crap! If he were one of mine, he wouldn't act like such a whiny little brat." Ron noticed John's worried expression and forced himself to stop taking his bad day at the office out on his new partner. He took a long heavy sigh and in a gentler tone, "Look, I'll let you deal with him. That way, he'll live longer."

"Thanks."

"At least you have shown maturity about all of this. Yes, you are anxious to learn the centuries of wisdom I have to offer but your impatience I view as a virtue not a flaw."

"Does this mean you intend to teach me something?" John asked with an edge to his voice. He was getting a little fed up with all the hanging around he'd been doing lately.

<I have taught you plenty already - you just don't realize it yet.>

<But Mind Speech is only part of what we can do. Can you show me how to do that trick I've seen Nick do? The one where he gets into people's heads and makes them obey him?>

Ron smiled slightly. "I could," he said aloud. "But you need someone to practice it on and I'm afraid I'm fresh out of test subjects."

John looked at his mentor, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I could try it out on you."

The Enforcer laughed out loud. John was about to protest but he *felt* then saw Dragutin entering the apartment.

"Glad to see someone is enjoying themselves," he remarked as he approached the duo. "What's so amusing?"

"John here thinks he can control my mind."

Dragutin chuckled softly. "I see."

"I didn't say *that*!" John protested. "I only said I wanted Ron to let me try it on him."

<Romulus, let him have a go.> Dragutin's expression was intense, serious and held the Enforcer's gold-eyed gaze as the pair connected mind-to-mind. *<It would be interesting to see what he can do. After all, he was not made as you and I were. He may just surprise you....>*

Ron looked at Dragutin thoughtfully. What his friend had said *was* true - John was *different* from them, so assuming he would be like any other neonate could potentially be a fatal error. *<Okay>* he told his friend. *<Let's see what this kid's got.>*

The Enforcer approached John saying, "All right, I'll let you have a shot at me. But to use your mental gifts on one of your own kind is a lot harder than it is to use them on a mortal."

"I know," John replied then, half smiling added, "If I can get anywhere with *you* then I know controlling a human would be a cinch."

Ron's eyes sparkled slightly with anticipation. He found John's willingness to take *him* on appealing. The kid has guts, I'll give him that, the Enforcer thought to himself.

John remembered what to look for to know he *had* his subject. Once he locked gazes with his mentor, he waited until their hearts beated in time with each other knowing this to be a sign that he had made the connection. *<Get me a drink>* John commanded.

The Enforcer's expression went blank for a split second, as though John *had* him. Then he grinned and his voice in John's head quipped, *<Get it yourself you lazy bum.>*

John groaned and turned away defeatedly. Ron caught him by the arm saying, "Not bad for a first try. I *did* feel something but you're not strong enough yet to take *me* on. However, I'm sure you could get any of the Kine you wanted wrapped around your little finger."

"But we may not be up against a mortal. The guy who shot you might be another *vampire.* Did you ever consider that?"

"Yes," Ron allowed. "And if so, you'll never get close enough to use your mind control on him. What you *will* need is one of these...." And with those words Ron drew out his piece - a .50 caliber Desert Eagle. "You talk about stopping power - this baby has it cold. I know regular bullets don't hurt us but garlic-filled hollow points, silver-jacketed .50 cal shells, glasers, you know, the kind of special loads *I* carry will slow a vampire down long enough for you to get him with more traditional means."

"You're going to give me *that*?" John queried incredulous.

"You know how to shoot, it was the first thing I showed you. Besides, it's the one thing you *can* do very well now. Your reflexes are far sharper than a mortal's and you could even out fast draw Doc Holliday, if the guy was still breathing, that is."

"So when we go up to Toronto, I'm going up there as a...a gunslinger?"

"No, a US Marshall. Ed the Computer Ghod got us the necessary paperwork for the three of us to get into Canada as Federal Marshals."

"I see."

"Don't worry. Tell them you're a rookie and no one will care you don't *look* old enough to be with us."

"What about Dragutin? He doesn't, uh, *look* like a cop."

Dragutin only smiled at this revelation and Ron replied, "He doesn't have to - his cover for this operation will be one that allows for his unique fashion sense." The Mage's eyes glittered with amusement as the Enforcer continued, "First off, though, we have to protect you from Lavinia's machinations."

"The spell that you said was in the Great Grimoire?"

"Yes. Dragutin found it and he'll perform the Ritual on you tonight. Lavinia intends to meet with you before we're dispatched to Toronto which means she'll be summoning us to meet with her sometime tomorrow."

"Come," Dragutin said gesturing toward the back room. "Let us take the steps needed to preserve your freedom...."

******

"Why is it every time I've stopped by here this week you've been wrist deep in guts?" Nick teased as he approached Natalie from behind while she was, literally, wrist deep inside a cadaver.

She gave him a dirty look. "Not funny."

He grinned, his blue eyes dancing. "All this *business* make you lose your sense of humor?"

She looked up at him curiously. "What are *you* so happy about?"

"Remember that liquor store shooting last week?"

She nodded.

"Got the guy. He also was responsible for two other armed robbery/homicides."

"No wonder you're so full of yourself," she remarked.

"Cohen is happy. And I just cut my outstandings down to a more livable five."

"And that makes *you* happy."

Nick just smiled. "Yep."

"Well, now it's time for you to make *me* happy," Natalie said as she withdrew from the body, set aside her equipment, and removed her bloodied gloves. "Time to check your progress."

"Time to be a pincushion," Nick corrected.

"Don't be such a baby."

"I'm *not*," he defended as he rolled up his shirt sleeve. "I just hate needles."

"You *are* too," she countered as she watched him cringe as the needle hit home. "You don't even blink when the bullets start flying but I come at you with this-" she held up the needle containing the blood sample she'd just drawn chuckling softly as Nick turned away, "and you wince. You really are too much."

"Bullets don't hurt....much," he stated as he quickly rolled down his sleeve and buttoned the cuff..

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, you're being good is making a difference. Your white cell count and T-cell counts have shifted upward - a good sign, Nick."

"I guess there's hope for this old bat yet," he teased.

She groaned at the bad joke. "If you aren't going to be serious-"

"Tomorrow, okay?" he said kissing her quickly on the cheek. "I just want to go out and *celebrate* having a normal caseload for the first time in I-don't-know-how-long!"

"Celebrate?"

"Is getting drunk off my ass against the doctor's recommended diet plan? I don't recall there being any stipulations about drinking oneself blind," he challenged, his blue eyes capturing hers and she could *tell* he was just pulling her leg. Nick was just coming down off a rough couple of months and, if he *could* drink himself into a blissful stupor, then she would have no arguments. So long as he left the Caddy home that is....

"Just be careful," was all she said turning away from him. She loved his sweet, boyish side - something she hadn't seen in a while because he had been so stressed out from the workload - she just wanted to take him in her arms and....

Nick didn't seem to have a clue. If he only knew how much she *wanted* him....

But Nick *did* know - she couldn't hide those raw emotions from him. But friendship was all he could give her right now. It would be too *dangerous* to try for something more. The last time he tried to get *that* close to a mortal woman he loved, he nearly killed her. He could not put Natalie at such a risk. But he did want to be with her, to love her, to hold her in his arms....

He sighed, his good mood slowly ebbing away and walked out in silence. It was times likes these when being a vampire really bit!

*****

Two stone faced Enforcers met John, Romulus (Ron) and Dragutin as they stepped inside the elevator set aside for Lavinia's exclusive use. It was the only *human* way to get to or from her penthouse (besides the legally required fire escape stairs) and all were required to use it - the Code had to be followed.

John felt the hair on the back of his neck creeping up - the two strange Enforcers made him feel *very* uneasy. He didn't like the way they were looking at him, kind of like a specimen beneath a biologist's microscope. He cast a sideways glance at his Mentor, who indicated with his eyes that they couldn't speak here - not with *them* watching. It also seemed that even their Mind Speech was out of the question - too risky in Romulus's opinion.

The doors opened and John breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped into the opulent foyer. Marble floors, a Monet inspired mural on the ceiling - it was *truly* grand indeed! He had never known anyone who lived *this* well. Lavinia must be doing something right...!

"So you are John," a sultry voice purred startling John for he didn't *feel* the presence of another approaching.

When he turned, he found himself almost face to face with a handsome fortysomething woman with long thick auburn hair piled high on her head in Roman fashion and a long flowing white gown whose organza layer trailed her always by at least two steps. To say she was beautiful would have been to do her a gross insult. She was the embodiment of feminine perfection - a modern Venus. John found himself both unable to take his eyes off her and make a movement of any kind. He was, quite literally, paralyzed by her appearance.

"Turn it off," Romulus commanded and Lavinia's soft green eyes turned hard as emeralds. "He's just a childe."

"He should *know* who he's dealing with, lest he get any ideas," she shot back pointedly. "Especially since circumstances forced him to be kept by *you*."

"Like I am in a position to do anything."

"Yes, and as long as you remember *that*, you may yet live to see your freedom."

John saw his Mentor's expression harden and could *tell* the Enforcer was holding back. Or was he being held back? Which way it was he couldn't be sure. In any event, John could *feel* his Mentor's cold rage and, although Lavinia could command the actions of Romulus Romanus, she could *not* command his spirit.

Lavinia's attention turned to John again. "Come with me, child," she cooed. "Let us get to *know* each other...."

John was still held in thrall by her and silently followed her into a drawing room done to perfection in the style of Louis the XIII save for one anachronism - a harpsichord. Drawn to the music like a moth to the flame, John sat down at the keyboard and started to play from the sheet music left from the last performer - a Chopin piece that was not familiar to John at all. It wasn't until he found his brain more fully returning to his own command that he realized *why* the piece looked unfamiliar.

The sheet music he was reading from had been handwritten by the composer himself!

Lavinia found the music pleasantly diverting and arranged herself on a divan to listen to the music of her latest recruit. He did have talent, she mused, and was handsome enough. He didn't *look* like an Enforcer - an asset in her opinion. The two that guarded her door were *effective* but one could *tell* they were something other than human. They were too pale, too cold and too *silent*. They had given up speech in favor of mental communication only and always moved with the icy deliberation the Community always associated with the Enforcers.

However, this young man whose summer tan had not been faded by The Change was perfect. She could not *feel* him. And if *she* couldn't sense him, than no other Kindred could. It was just *too* perfect! Now, all that remained was to get him Bonded and then trained by Romulus.

She glanced backward towards the door where she *knew* her former lover waited with his Mage comrade. The man who with his brother had founded one of

the greatest civilizations known to modern man wasn't perfect - the deed that got him Bound to her proved that well enough - but he *still* had his uses. Lavinia intended to exploit *all* that dear Romulus could give her before his indenture to her was up.

When John completed the piece, he glanced over at Lavinia, who beckoned him to join her with a graceful hand gesture. He did as she asked and sat next to her wearing an expression of both fear and curiosity.

"I won't hurt you," she told him. "I don't know what Romulus told you, but being Bonded isn't painful."

"He told me his Bonding hurt like hell."

"Because he resisted," she explained. "If you cooperate, you might actually e*njoy* this." He looked puzzled and she continued, "It's very simple, childe. All that we do is...well, *bite* each other."

"That's it?!"

She laughed at his consternation. "What did you *think* it was?"

"I don't know....something more complicated. Anyway, I....Well....I never....You know, ever put the bite on anyone yet."

Now it was *her* turn to look surprised. "You've lived with Romulus all this time and you never went hunting? How have you lived?"

"Bottled blood," he explained. "Ron, uh, Romulus never took me out *hunting.* I don't even think *he* hunted while I've been living with him. Unless, of course, he drank whoever you ordered him to execute."

She sighed thoughtfully. "Well, I guess *I'm* to be your first victim." Her green eyes changed to a startling shade of red gold and her canines were long and sharp like a tiger's. "But I won't be an easy mark," she taunted.

He felt The Change coming over him and his Beast wanted to match wills with her. They Embraced each other like two wild creatures coupling in the night, the ecstasy of their bloodsharing union audible to those who waited beyond the double doors.....

Romulus cast Dragutin a worried look. <*Do you think your magick can hold up to* ***that****?*> he queried gesturing toward the door with a slight tilt of his chin.

<*It would work on one of* ***us****, of that I am sure,*> Dragutin replied turning away from the double doors that led to Lavinia's salon.

<*But John isn't one of us.*>

<*I know. But, even so, I felt no resistance during the casting, so the Ritual* ***should*** *have an effect upon him. Weather or not it will sustain the pressure of Lavinia's workings->*

Romulus broke off contact, the prospect of losing John to Lavinia was *not* an option he wanted to think about just then. He had no desire to see his pupil bound to that conniving witch. Romulus had been a fool when he was young by allowing himself to be enchanted by her more obvious charms. It was because of her that he agreed to being brought across by Divia, a decision he never really regretted even though he still felt that choosing his vampiric life to keep the affection of a manipulative, power-hungry female was *not* the smartest move he ever made.

He could *feel* what was going on within that salon. There were times when having the keen sensitivity that came with the Ancient blood was *not* an asset. Romulus wished he could just walk out and come back after she was finished with John but he knew Lavinia's two guards would never let him go.

Dragutin sensed his friend's discomfort and said, <*It's almost done.*>

<*I know*> Romulus said pointedly. <*I can feel it.*> He cast a careful eye at Dragutin trying his best to keep a tight reign on his emotions, for, although his thoughts were well-shielded, it was far more difficult to keep his *feelings* from being hidden. <*She is doing the thing here, so close to me, to torment me. As though being her Bondsman isn't enough punishment.*>

Dragutin drew closer to him, appearing as though he intended to whisper something in Romulus's ear and Sent, *<This is no torment compared to what she would do to you were she to discover your duplicity. If the Bonding fails and she finds out->*

<I....have a plan concerning that outcome. And, don't worry. You will not be the one to draw her wrath if the magick upon John is found out. I will claim responsibility.>

<But->

<She would have you destroyed! It is the only way!>

Dragutin sighed drawing away from his comrade. He knew once Romulus had his mind set, there would be little he could do to change it. *<I pray, for your sake, she discovers nothing.>* was the last thing Dragutin Sent.

A few minutes later, the double doors opened and a rather disheveled young vampire staggered out of the room. John's eyes were still gleaming gold but were glazed over, like he was under the effect of some weird hypnotic drug. He made his way unsteadily over to the duo.

"That...wasn't so bad," John said sounding as gone as he looked. And he looked like he was stoned out of his mind.

<This is not good.> Romulus stated.

<Don't jump to any conclusions,> Dragutin cautioned. *<He's still basking in the afterglow. Give him some time to calm down. John may still be free of Lavinia's influence.>*

<For his sake I hope you're right....>

Romulus took John off to the bathroom and managed to get his pupil at least *looking* normal, even though he could *tell* John was still in the midst of the rush from ingesting all of that Ancient blood. It was an intoxicating high, unlike anything a mortal could experience - even with the use of chemicals. John was doing everything asked of him like his body was going on automatic - he didn't seem *aware* of any of his actions.

It unnerved Romulus to see him like that. And, as they left the bathroom, he discovered something that bothered him even more. He couldn't reach John psychically. The boy's mind was completely closed, like a great wall had been erected around his thoughts. If this effect was permanent....

<Hey, Boss> he heard John ask. *<You okay?>*

<I'm fine> he replied, but it had been *John* who had opened the link so Romulus still wasn't sure if his pupil was accessible mentally. *<I couldn't reach you before.>*

<You have me now.>

<You contacted me.>

He could feel the wheels of thought turning for a moment before he heard the reply, *<You think she did something to me?>*

<Do you feel different?>

<Well...not so much anymore but I was really, well, spaced out for a while there. It felt weird but kinda nice at the same time. I can't explain it->

<You don't have to.> Romulus interrupted. *<I've been there remember?>*

They stopped speaking when the reached the entrance to Lavinia's salon. The double doors were open and Dragutin stood near the entrance to the room. He was obviously waiting for them to return. The moment they were all there, Romulus *felt* it - The Summoning. Lavinia was using her psychic energy to draw upon the mystical hold she had on him though her Blood Bond to call him to her. The Enforcer/guards Lavinia had watching over Dragutin and Romulus also felt the Call but they remained at their posts - obviously told by their mistress to stay put. Dragutin also sensed the Call, but he was picking it up on a different level - one tied more to his magickal nature than to his Kindred Blood.

John looked at the two men curiously. He noticed they both had these strange faraway expressions on their faces as they entered the salon. He had no idea what was going on and he trailed along after the two of them thinking that if Lavinia didn't want him in there with them, she would probably tell him to get out.

Once inside, the double doors closed of their own accord. Lavinia approached Romulus, her gold eyes flickering with red - a sign of anger in Kindred kind. "What have you done?" she demanded.

"What are you talking about?" Romulus replied puzzled.

"Him," she stated pointing directly at John. "He didn't respond to my Summons."

"Yes, he did. He's *here*, isn't he?"

"He came in here because *you* came in here!" she told him. "Now I want the truth, Romulus. What did you and this wizard do to him?"

Romulus dared to face her, his own gold with red flecked eyes locking gazes with hers. Although he *knew* it would cost him greatly to deceive her, he was willing to do it to give John the only thing of value he really had to offer the boy - a chance to keep his freedom.

"We did *nothing*," he stated calling upon every ounce of training he had to keep the lie undetectable. All the bodily signs that would betray him were carefully held in check, so that his words would ring as genuine if she were Truth Reading him, which he knew was *exactly* what she was doing. "If the Bonding didn't work as expected, it's because he isn't like *us*. He is a creature of the Aberat's magic, not one of the True Blood."

"If he cannot be Bonded, I cannot be certain of his loyalty," she stated icily. "I don't *like* that."

"Then I guess you won't be wanting me to train him for you."

"I didn't say that!" she countered quickly glaring at Romulus.

"Then what *are* you saying?"

"That, since I can't be sure of him, I'm going to be holding *you* responsible for his actions. If he betrays me, it will be *you* who will be punished. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

She turned away from them. "You have your assignment. Your plane leaves within the hour. I suggest you get...flying."

All three of them bowed silently to her back and left.

Once they were safely down and out of the building, Romulus escaped into the nearest alleyway and was violently ill. Dragutin kept mortal curiosity at bay with a quick illusion but it was John who was physically there keeping the ill Enforcer's back covered. When his stomach finally calmed, Romulus wiped the blood sweat and tears off his face and allowed John to help him back out onto the dimly lit street. He felt weak, his stomach was in knots, and every muscle ached as though he was wracked with a flulike infection. John had no idea what was wrong with his mentor but he did know one thing - Romulus was in bad shape.

"Dragutin, what's with him?" John asked.

"He defied the magick of the Bond, when he lied to Lavinia, and now he is paying the price for his deed. You *can't* act against the will or orders of the one you are Bonded to - your body won't let you. The only reason Romulus managed to do it at all is because, as an Ancient, he has had *centuries* to train his body to respond to his mental commands but, as you can see, the Bond is quite powerful and exacts its price from the one who dares to defy its Calling."

"But he can't go to Toronto like this! He'll never make it!"

"He'll be all right," Dragutin assured him. He quickly hailed a cab and, as they loaded the weak-kneed Romulus inside, Dragutin added, "You don't have to

worry about a thing, John. Romulus *knew* there was a risk involved with protecting you. And we both were *very* careful to be sure we had a plan in place that would insure our mission in Toronto would succeed no matter what...."

*****

John was beginning to wonder what Dragutin and Romulus could have planned that would have been able to account for the recent bad turn of events. During the entire flight, his mentor had wavered between consciousness and that comalike state Kindred entered into when their bodies were too badly damaged to sustain their mental processes - Torpor. While in Torpor, the body would heal while the mind dreamed or wandered, which one happened depended upon the age and strength of the Vampire, and this healing process could pass as quickly a day or could stretch into *decades.*

Romulus was fighting his body's desire to enter into Torpor but it seemed it was a losing fight until, during the cab ride over to 101 Gateway, Dragutin was able to rouse him by giving Romulus some pills that looked like red beads.

"What were those?" John asked the mage.

"Blood pills," Dragutin whispered. John looked puzzled and the Kindred wizard continued, "The spell that created them is called Principle Focus of Vitae Infusion and is an *old* Ritual I learned from my Sire just after I was Brought Across. The spell was designed for ministering to injured members of the Community - field medicine for Vampires, if you will. Blood is needed for us to heal our wounds as well as to sustain our existence."

"Those pills will help Ron - Romulus - get better?"

"They'll keep him out of Torpor....for now. He'll have to rest though. The injuries he did to himself by defying Lavinia were too great to be healed normally. All I can do is keep him awake long enough to strike his agreement with Detective Knight and get *you* and the detective to cooperate long enough to find this killer of our people."

"Nick doesn't care much for the Enforcers," John said sounding worried. "And I *know* he doesn't like Ron, uh, Romulus very much."

"That's why *I'm* here," Dragutin said smiling slightly. "We are going to propose a trade. I'll make Nick mortal again if he aids us in the solution of this case."

"You can do that!?" John cried incredulous.

"The spell to reverse what we are exists in the Great Grimoire," Dragutin said softly. "But to execute it is not a simple thing. One of the prime components for the working is Ancient blood from a *willing* donor. Not an easy thing to get."

"No Ancients want to see their childer turned mortal, is that it?"

"Yes, for they fear that, as mortals able to walk in daylight, these former childer will slay them as they sleep."

John could see where this fear came from. He was sure that, if Nick were mortal again and he knew where he could find LaCroix, he'd stake Uncle in a heartbeat and feel not an ounce of remorse for the deed.

Nick is going to say yes, John thought to himself. He would gladly put up with the Enforcers if it meant a sure fire chance at humanity. And I've seen enough of Dragutin's sorcery to know that, if it was possible to make Nick human by magic, then Dragutin was just the mage to pull it off.

John glanced over at Romulus, who was staring sightlessly out the window. He *did* look bad. John was going to say something when he heard Dragutin Send, <*Romulus will be able to do his part in the Ritual. But, because of his current state, the stress of* the *Ritual could destroy him.*> John's eyes widened at this revelation and the mage continued, <*It is a risk - but I believe Rom is strong enough to survive it, although*

it will most certainly put him into Torpor for a long while. Romulus has made the choice to allow me to use him in the Ritual fully aware of the risks. You must promise to say nothing. Knight must not know what Romulus is willing to do. We ***must*** *solve this case and stop the killings, no matter what the cost. I doubt Nick would allow me to do the Ritual if he knew there was the chance it could destroy Romulus. Because of this, you* ***must not tell*** *him! Do you promise?>*

John nodded <*Yes*>

As the taxi pulled up to the warehouse, John noticed the blinds were up and the lights were on. Nick was home. Either he got home early or it was a night off, but, even so, he was there and they would get their chance to see him.

Dragutin paid the driver and the three of them exited the taxi. After it sped off, Dragutin went skyward to check on Nick and returned seconds later. "He's home and alone. Romulus, are you *sure* you want to go through with this?"

The Enforcer looked at both his old friend and his pupil when he answered in a firm voice, "More than anything...."

*****

John pressed the buzzer and he heard Nick's voice through the intercom ask, "Who is it?"

Nick could see who was there - he had a security camera on the door - but John got the feeling Nick was somehow testing him. "John, John Dencoff," John told him. "I have some friends with me. Can we come up?"

The passkey buzzing was the only reply John got and John led the way in. The took the elevator up to the loft and, when they got out, Nick was standing there looking like he was ready for *anything*..

Romulus noticed the Glock in Nick's shoulder holster had the safety off - not a sight to inspire confidence - and the Enforcer said, "We're not here to fight with you, Knight."

"Then what *do* you want, Romulus?" Nick asked, obviously on the defensive.

John's eyes widened slightly. The last time he was there at Nick's place, Nick hadn't addressed the Enforcer by his true name. John wasn't sure if Nick called Romulus by *anything* other than his title, but, then again, there *had* been a lot of mortals around back then and one's vampiric true name was not something bandied about before the Kine. Doing so was a subtle (but not overt) breach of the Code.

The Enforcer motioned to Dragutin to hand Nick the attaché case he was carrying. "In my attaché is all the data we have on the murders. We are sure the person who killed the four members of our Community in New York and the one killing Kindred here in Toronto is the same person. I'm providing you with this information as a peace offering. We both have a common goal here - I think we should cooperate and work together."

"You're *not* a cop," Nick said pointedly.

Romulus produced the ID and badge of a US Federal Marshall. "I have extradition papers already drawn up that will *give* me the authority to take the killer - when we catch him - back to America. Don't bother checking out these credentials, Knight. They *are* genuine. Well, they are at least as genuine as your own."

Nick glared at him but made no reply. Much of his current existence was due to the wonders of computer technology. Larry Merlin *was* a genius. So was Aristotle. But Nick *knew* the Enforcers had computer wizards of their own ready to ply their trade for the benefit of their Ancient masters.

"What is it you *really* want?" Nick demanded still not at all ready to trust the Enforcer of his comrades.

"I want to catch this killer," Romulus stated. "But a US Marshall can only do so much in Canada. We need the cooperation of the local constabulary. To put it bluntly, Knight, we *need* you to work with us on this case."

"I don't work with Enforcers."

"Not even Enforcers who can give you the chance to regain your mortality?"

"*Nani??*" ("What??" in Japanese)

"It's true," John said. "Dragutin found a Ritual in the Great Grimoire that can reverse vampirism. And it won't have the side effect the Aberat's spell did! It *won't* make someone else a vampire when it frees you from the curse."

"Why?" Nick asked looking straight at Romulus.

"I won't lie to you. It isn't for purely altruistic reasons. I need your help on this case enough to give you something you want in exchange for it. I also know that, once you are human again, you will no doubt seek out a mutual enemy and destroy him. For good, this time."

Nick gasped. So *that* was it! The Enforcer wanted him to destroy LaCroix! He *knew* the Enforcers had been looking for a way to get rid of his vampiric master for a long time - their desire to end LaCroix's existence only increasing after LaCroix managed to defy the Vampire Archivist and *not* tell that Ancient historian of Kindred Kind the tale of his long life. But The Code prevented the Enforcer's from just doing him in because LaCroix had never (overtly, at least) violated The Code, and it was *only* for a breach of the Code that a Kindred could be executed. But, as a mortal, Nick would not be subject to The Code and could destroy LaCroix without consequence. What they seemed to be forgetting, though, was that he could also take *them* out as well....

Romulus was following Nick's line of thought and said, "Don't even *consider* trying to destroy ***us*** after you are a mortal. Code or no Code, you send any one of the three of us on to Final Death, you *will* be hunted and you *will* be slain. We will be risking our own destruction by performing the Ritual of Life upon you, so take care that we don't *all* live to regret this night."

"What guarantee do you have that, once I'm mortal, I'll do what you want?"

"None. But I *know* you'll seek out LaCroix and get rid of him. He will *never* leave you alone, Nick. He will do *anything* to get you back, *especially* if the Ritual works. You have no choice but to rid yourself of him if you ever want to have peace in your life."

The Enforcer was right. LaCroix would *never* let him enjoy his humanity. He would find some way to either reverse it or make his life a living hell. Nick *would* have to destroy his master if he ever hoped to enjoy life as an ordinary mortal man.

After a long pause, Nick asked, "What does this Ritual of yours entail?"

"It is very simple, really," Dragutin said, speaking up for the first time since they had arrived in Nick's loft. "I will be doing the actual working, what you must be willing to do is consume a special potion that will allow the magick to take hold."

Nick shrugged. He had been poked, prodded, stuck, fed and bled all in the name of regaining his humanity that having to quaff yet one more strange drink didn't faze him at all.

"Sure," Nick said with a resigned sigh. "Whatever you say."

"Good," Dragutin said, his Romainian accent coming through moreso than usual. He motioned to Nick to sit and Nick planted himself on his black leather sofa. Dragutin glanced over at Romulus and said, "You, come with me. John, stay with Nicola while I get everything prepared."

John nodded and sat on the sofa next to Nick. Nick looked quizzically over at John and asked, "Is this for real or are those two up to something?"

"It's genuine, Nick," John assured him.

John knew Nick was using his talent to Sense Deception on him but he didn't mind. Nick had every right to be suspicious but, this time, he was going to find out that the Enforcer was *not* trying to pull a fast one.

Nick *Sensed* John was telling him the truth and he sighed, a little surprised but pleasantly so. "So, how has it been for you?" Nick asked.

"Okay, I guess. Ron - Romulus - isn't so bad. He *isn't* LaCroix. I'm *not* saying he's a Good-guy vampire, because he isn't, but he does have his good qualities. I guess, in that sense, he's like everyone else, a mix of good and bad."

"How has he been treating you?"

"Like an overprotective father," John replied and Nick chuckled slightly. "Seriously, though, he *has* been trying to keep me from getting sucked up into the bad side of the Enforcer deal." Nick cast him a curious gaze and John added, quickly by way of explanation, "All the Enforcers are Blood Bound to the Ancient they serve. Romulus had Dragutin do a Ritual on me to prevent me from being able to be Bound to anyone. He said he did it so I could keep my freedom. And, after seeing what a Bond does to a person, I'm glad he had Dragutin do his magick on me. I would *never* want anyone to have that kind of power over my life."

Nick agreed with *that* thought. For all of his manipulativeness, LaCroix *never* tried to Bind Nick to him. However, Nick *was* still linked, psychically at least, with his vampiric master. But that type of bond was far easier to overcome than the one that tied Romulus to whatever Ancient he served. Romulus had no real freedom and the fact that the Enforcer had a Ritual done on John to keep John from winding up a slave to some Ancient gave Nick pause. He had thought Romulus to be a callous fiend like the rest of the Enforcers, but it seemed there was more to John's Kindred mentor than he had previously thought.

Dragutin returned with Romulus in tow to the living room. The mage was carrying one of Nick's familiar green bottles as well as a pouch containing some items he needed for the Ritual. Dragutin didn't look concerned about Romulus which made John curious for The Enforcer looked like he was about to collapse. Romulus looked pale and feverish and moved with careful deliberation as though every step was an effort.

John was at his side in an eyeblink. "What happened?"

"Whatever happens, John, promise me one thing. You will *not* allow Lavinia to destroy your life the way she did mine," Romulus said with a strength born more of his personal convictions than from some as yet untapped physical reserve. "I may not be around to help you fight her but Dragutin has agreed to help you. He has access to some....power that only the Kindred of his bloodline possess. He has promised to teach you what you will need to know to defy Lavinia and live. Promise me you will become his pupil should I be unable to complete your training."

"I promise."

<I won't be conscious after this Ritual> Romulus Sent. *<It will put me into Torpor - the stress of the Working and my injuries combined will be enough to put me out.>*

<But->

<Don't worry, John. I'll be all right. Dragutin will look after me while I'm recovering and he will take over your training until I'm back on me feet. You must ***not*** *tell Knight what this Ritual will be doing to me. He must not know, understood?>*

John nodded silently saying nothing.

<Good>

"Is everyone ready?" John heard Dragutin ask and all assembled nodded. The Mage handed Nick the wine bottle saying, "You must drink *all* of this, Nicola. While you are drinking, I will be casting the Circle. John, you must stay outside the Work area. Romulus, you are to stay where you are. I will be drawing upon your Ancient energies to Power this spell."

"I understand," Romulus said quietly.

"Okay," Nick agreed.

John stepped away to watch from a safe distance. Dragutin pulled a vial full of a blue with white flecked powder from his pouch and uncorked it. A fine glittering mist sprang forth from the container and the fine powder flowed lightly down onto Nick and Romulus. Romulus and Nick exchanged an uncertain look before both of them focused their gaze onto Dragutin.

"You, close your eyes and Focus," Dragutin commanded Romulus. "And you," he continued looking directly at Nick. "Begin consuming the potion."

Nick uncorked the bottle and took a drink. It tasted like the blood/wine mixture Janette liked to sip now and again but, as more and more of it entered his system as he drank, he could *feel* there was something else in the mixture besides what he overtly tasted. As he watched Dragutin lay the blue-white powder in a circle that encased both himself and Romulus within its walls and chant words in a tongue he did not understand, Nick felt *something* was happening to him but he couldn't tell exactly what. He was sure of one thing though - he *did* feel different.

Romulus opened his eyes. He *knew* he was manifesting his vampiric nature but he did not care. He would soon be free of Lavinia's Bond and able once more to act as a free man. He could hardly wait....!

The Circle was complete and Dragutin then began the Working in earnest. The old words fell effortlessly from his lips and Nick suddenly felt very lightheaded. He closed his eyes fighting off the waves of dizziness and, when the feeling passed, he opened his eyes and found he was no longer substantial. He glanced down at his body, which was still sitting in the chair but looked like it was asleep and the ghostlike form *he* now was stood face to face with another ghostly form.

The other spirit was Romulus and the Romulus ghost was manifesting the Beast within - gold eyes, long fangs, all of it was there in an almost proud display. "I *will* have my revenge upon the ones responsible for my enslavement," the ghostly Enforcer told Nick. "And I have *you* to thank for it!"

"What are you talking about?" the Nick ghost demanded.

"You'll soon see...." the Romulus ghost taunted as he drifted downward, the ghost form disappearing into Nick's slumbering body.

"***NO***!" the Nick ghost screamed but it seemed no one could hear him, see him or even sense him.

He *felt* a strange tugging on his spiritual body and he tried to fight it but it was far stronger than he was. The force pushed him down into the body of The Enforcer and it was trapped within that damaged form that Nick found now himself. When Nick's Spirit merged with the flesh of his new body, the urge to sleep the Long Sleep overcame him and Nick succumbed to an enveloping wave of darkness....

John saw both Nick and Romulus lose consciousness during the Ritual and wondered if that was supposed to happen. He hoped nothing went wrong but he had no way of knowing. He nervously fingered the Hammer of Thor he wore around his neck, one of the many symbols of Asatru, his faith, and said a prayer to the gods for the safe deliverance of both his mentor and Nick Knight.

The Ritual ended and a spent-looking Dragutin carefully broke the Circle. He went first to Romulus placing a gentle hand upon the Enforcer's temple to Read him.

"Is he okay?" John asked.

"He'll be fine," Dragutin said quietly as he withdrew his hand. "He's in Torpor, John. But he *will* recover in time."

"What about Nick?"

"What about me?" John heard Nick say and, when his eyes met Nick's, he *thought* he saw something familiar there but he couldn't be certain. In any event, Nick appeared to be perfectly fine.

"Did the Ritual work?"

<*Did it?*> Dragutin dared to Send, knowing if it *was* Nick still in there, he would receive a far different response than he would if it was Romulus who now dwelled within the Knight's body.

<*Perfectly*> came back a thought that was chillingly familiar.

Dragutin smiled slightly and said to John, "Yes, it worked. Let's get Romulus upstairs and into bed so he can rest. Then it will be up to you and Nick to carry on your investigation."

"But if Nick's mortal now-"

"It's okay, John," Nick reassured him. "I can still do my job. And I'd like to get this information Romulus brought with him down to the precinct. He was right about working together. We will need to cooperate if we are ever going to catch this killer."

"Okay," John agreed.

"Come, help me with Romulus," Dragutin said and John assisted the mage in bringing his mentor upstairs to Nick's bedroom.

The second they were gone, Romulus-as-Nick gloated openly enjoying the feeling of being Bond-free for the first time in years. He looked at himself and the mirror and smiled at the handsome blond-haired reflection that smiled back. The lean young body felt good and it would stay strong as long as he kept it well nourished and supplemented the usual feeding with some magic Dragutin supplied for the occasion. But the magick was not long-lasting, so Romulus knew he would have to accomplish his mission quickly or risk destroying Nick and possibly himself as well.

Now he could do what he really came to Toronto to do - hunt down the person responsible for his being Bound to Lavinia in the first place. Catch the one who really killed Divia and framed him for the crime. The one who had the audacity to see him dragged bound and drained almost unto Final Death before a Tribunal that sentenced him to a fate worse than Final Death - slavery to another Ancient. The one who would least expect to meet his end at the hands of his own childe, even if that same childe had, at one time, tried to take his Master's life.

"LaCroix," Romulus-as-Nick said quietly, menacingly. "Just you wait....!"

******

John cast a worried look down at the sleeping Enforcer. Even though Dragutin assured him Romulus would recover in time, he found his mentor's pale unmoving form disconcerting. <*He looks dead*> John Sent. <*He isn't even breathing.*>

<*He is breathing*> Dragutin corrected gently. <*His metabolic processes have been greatly slowed but his body* ***is*** *still functioning*>

"He *will* recover, right?" John said aloud.

"Yes, but, in the meantime, *you* have a case to work on. Nick is waiting for you downstairs."

"What about you?"

"I'll stay with Romulus until I am sure he is stable. Then I will join you."

John nodded and went back downstairs. He heard clunking sounds coming from the kitchen and, when he looked in to see what was going on, he saw Nick rooting around in his cupboards as though looking for something.

"What's up, Nick?"

"There's no food in this house!" he replied, then added with a wry grin, "Except for the stuff *you* eat."

"Guess that spell worked after all," John said smiling.

"TOO well," Nick stated. "I'm starved!"

"Maybe you should go food shopping."

"I haven't eaten anything for so long I don't even know what I'd like!"

John laughed at this and teased, "Well, when all else fails, go for sweets. Donuts, candy, you know, the stuff your partner loves to snack on whenever he gets the chance!"

"Donut Don would have a cow if he saw me scarfing a jelly filled."

"All the more reason...." John let the thought trail off and the two of them shared a conspiratorial smile.

"I can hardly wait to see the look on Natalie's face-"

"You *have* to see her! Now!" John insisted.

"I-I guess I should. But we have work to do. We can't forget-"

"Don't worry about it!" John broke in enthusiastically. "Tell Nat the good news, then take me to see Captain Cohen. I do have to let her know I'm here and that we'll be working together on this investigation."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Nick agreed as he grabbed the attaché case Romulus had Dragutin bring in for Nick's use. Nick unlocked and popped open the case and checked over the paperwork - all there in perfect order. He snapped the case closed and handed it to John saying, "You'd better hang on to this. It'll make you look more official."

"Do I really look that...young?" John queried.

"Well....dressed the way your are in that three piece Brooks Brothers, you *can* pass, but only if you say you're a rookie."

"That's what Romulus told me to tell people," John replied. "That I'm a rookie on a training mission."

"You sure are, in more ways than people realize," Nick added meaningfully and John half-smiled in response.

John looked at the attaché case thoughtfully. He was trying to recall when Romulus gave Nick the combination but couldn't remember hearing him give it out. Unless he did it telepathically, which was the way Romulus preferred to communicate things he wanted to keep private. Even so, it *was* kind of odd the way Nick had handled the attaché. Almost like it was his....

"Come on kid, let's go before my stomach climbs up my esophagus and throttles me for ignoring it's demands," Nick said giving John's arm a good natured tug in the direction of the door.

John was pulled out of his private musing and gave Nick a grin. Nick pulled out the keys to the Caddy and teased, "First one to the garage gets to drive!"

Momentarily stunned by Nick's challenge, John stood staring at Nick's back as the detective scurried out the door. John could still outrun the newly human Nick Knight without even *thinking* about it but he was too surprised by Nick's sudden friendliness to take advantage of his advantage. By the time he was over the shock and got himself (quite quickly!) to the garage, Nick was already in the driver's seat with the motor humming and the garage doors were rising to allow them to pass.

"Buckle up, kid," Nick said his eyes gleaming mischievously. "It's going to be a bumpy ride!"

And with that, Nick peeled out of the garage and sped off into the quiet Toronto night.

*****

Natalie Lambert glanced at the clock. It was nearly four in the morning - dawn would be breaking in an hour or so. Getting to see the sunrise every morning used to be a pleasant experience. It stopped being one after she met Nick, the only person in her life that couldn't enjoy the beauty of a sunrise or anything having to do with the light of day.

However, if it were within her power to change all that, she would. Right now, she could only hope that one of the compounds she was experimenting with would have just that right one magic ingredient....

"Hey, Nat? Care to join me for breakfast?"

Natalie looked up from her lab table. It *sounded* like Nick but the voice was too *happy* to be Nick. He also was talking about eating *breakfast* - something she has yet to see Nick do.

But it *was* Nick and he stood there looking very cheerful, rosy-cheeked and...human. *Very* human. What the heck....?

"Nick...?" she queried incredulously.

"It's me," he said closing the distance between them. "And you did hear me right. I *did* ask you out for breakfast!"

"But how....?"

"I think I can explain that, Dr. Lambert," John said as he entered the room. "Last night a friend of mine did something called the Ritual of Life on Nick. The spell is supposed to convert a Kindred, uh, a mean a vampire, into a human. And it worked."

Natalie stood there dumbfounded. Nick took advantage of the situation and gave Natalie a kiss that made her body tingle all the way down to the tips of her toes. He pulled off the scrunchy that held her long wavy dark hair back in its usual ponytail and let her mane fall free. She enveloped him in her arms and pressed herself against him. With her body ***that*** close to his, she felt the hardness of his growing desire.

They had both waited *so long* for this moment....!

John was beginning to feel very uncomfortable. Nick looked like he was about to do the horny pony with Natalie right there on the metal lab table and he seemed oblivious to John's presence.

"Uh, Nick?" John queried hesitantly. "We've got to go see the Captain, remember?"

Nick somehow managed to reign in his hormones and disentangled himself. Blushing a bit and looking a little sheepish, he said, "Yeah, right, I almost forgot."

Natalie also was looking more than a little embarrassed. She, too, had forgotten about John. "I guess we'll do breakfast....later."

"I'll be back," he said taking her back into his arms and kissing her. John turned away when he saw Nick slipping her the tongue. They were entwined for a long moment before John's attention was called back by Nick's voice saying, "Come on, kid. Let's get you taken care of....."

*****

"Who's the kid, Nick?" Schanke asked as he stole a glance at John through Captain Cohen's partially opened door.

"US Marshall," Nick said through a mouthful of jelly donut. "Rookie, but he's very bright."

"Oh, yeah? They why'd he come knocking on *your* door?"

Nick's only response to that jibe was a gesture that would be considered ***very*** rude if you were in Japan and Schanke only shrugged. "What's *that* supposed to mean?" he asked.

"It's Japanese sign language for *"get bent"*."

Schanke just rolled his eyes and headed off to get himself another cup of coffee. Nick followed his partner. Schanke was wearing one of his infamous loud ties that just barely matched his blue suit and it was so bright Nick thought it had neon in it. Nick waited while Schanke got first crack at the sugar. Nick wanted *more* sugar in his coffee. The stuff they made at the precinct was strong. Schanke just stared as Nick

dumped two heaping teaspoons of sugar into his coffee and then went for seconds on the donuts.

"Donuts, Nick?"

"I'm hungry and *desperate*, Schanke. I haven't eaten since yesterday!"

"No wonder Natalie is always on your case about your diet! You have lousy feeding habits, Knight. It's why you're so damn skinny."

Nick grinned and dug into donut number two. "Well, if I keep hanging out with **you-"** he began giving Schanke a good-natured poke in his ample belly - "I'm not going to stay skinny for long!"

"You've *been* hanging out with me, you little creep, and you are still as scrawny as the day I met you!"

"Do I detect just a tiny note of jealousy here?" Nick teased.

"Nick, you and your hyperactive metabolism, or whatever it is about you that's weird, which is quite a lot, can go kiss my Polish-Italian--"

"Knight, Schanke, in here. Now!" Captain Cohen commanded cutting Schanke off in mid-insult.

Nick left behind his snack and, quickly wiping off the powdered sugar from his hands onto his pants (which he then had to brush off to hide the white spots!) Nick went into her office followed by his slightly miffed partner.

John had laid out all the files pertinent to the investigation and Nick noticed the work of their department was co-mixed with it.

Cohen looked at Schanke and then Nick and said, "Why is it you two always get the strange ones?"

Nick was about to come out with a snappy comeback and, sensing this, Schanke elbowed him in the ribs to keep him quiet. John caught the exchange and barely managed to keep from laughing.

"Okay, Agent Dencoff will be riding with you two. 'Try not to embarrass us, okay?" Cohen said pointedly to the two detectives, who each were giving the other a knowing glance. She closed the gap between them saying, "Schanke, you will stay away from the fast food joints and you, Knight, no stopping by the Raven for a quickie."

Schanke looked uncomfortable and Nick actually had the decency to blush. John was enjoying all of this. <*Quickies?*> he Sent to Nick, who looked at him startled for a moment before relaxing enough to allow John to use his Mind Power to establish a link. <*I want to hear about* ***this!***>

<*You would, you little pervert!*> Nick shot back teasingly.

<*Janette?*>

<*Who else?*>

<*Lucky you!*>

Nick exchanged a naughty grin with John, who was beginning to *like* this new, human Nick Knight. He was a lot more *like* now that he was mortal. All that angst was gone. It would be interesting working with him.

"You boys understand the rules of the game?" Cohen stated more than asked and Knight and Schanke nodded yes. "Good. Agent Dencoff, anything you need, these two gentlemen will make sure you have it. And I'll make sure that, after you catch our killer, the extradition papers you provided get processed ASAP. If the Americans leave us any bones to chew on, we want them. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain," John agreed.

"Marshall Karren expected to be up and around soon?" she asked.

"Ron's going to be heading back to the States as soon as the doctor says he can travel. Can't mess around with a bleeding ulcer."

"Well, you give him my regards. I guess your other associate, Mr. Ladislav, will be joining you?"

"Yes, as soon as he possibly can," John assured her. "In the meantime, I have my assignment and I'm sure Detectives Knight and Schanke will be able to help me out."

"They will," she stated. "I guess that's all, gentlemen. Let's get out there and get our man."

The three men left the office and, once outside in the squadroom, John glanced over at Nick and Sent *<I guess you found out you like donuts?>*

<No,> Nick Sent back. *<But, when you're starving, anything tastes good!>*

*<You're **still** hungry?>*

<No, not at all. I think I must've eaten too much too fast because I'm feeling->

Nick cut off the transmission as he made a bolt for the men's room. John followed with Schanke way behind. He saw how fast Nick had moved - it was ***too*** fast for a mortal - and now Nick was getting sick from the food he ate. This was *not* a good sign.

By the time John got to Nick, he was in the process of washing his face with cold water while trying to regain his composure. He looked pale and feverish and John felt his heart sink as he saw the pink tinged beads of sweat starting to trickle down Nick's face.

"Oh, Nick, I'm so sorry...." was all John could say as he joined Nick by the sink.

"I knew it was too good to be true," Nick replied softly. "I'm okay now. Just...just get me home, okay?" John nodded and Nick added, "I'll...I'll tell Nat the bad news myself. *After* I've had some time to....assimilate all of this."

John stood by quietly while Nick got himself together enough to face humanity again. He stepped out of the bathroom just as Schanke was getting there. "You okay?" he asked concerned.

"Stomach flu," John explained. "It's been going around."

"Great."

"I'll live," Nick said with a wry half-smile. "John's giving me a ride home. He'll be all yours until tomorrow night. I'll solo with him then so *you* can have a night off. Okay, partner?"

"Sure. Just don't tell Cohen you're sick, or she'll blow a gasket. We're short-handed as it is."

"It'll be our secret."

"He'll be all right," John said reassuringly, then added as an afterthought, "And I'll be right back, Detective Schanke,"

"Call me Don, kid."

"I'm John, not ***kid***," John stated giving Schanke a hard look that gave the senior detective a moment's pause. "First names are fine with me. I just don't like being treated like I'm inferior because, believe me, I'm ***not***."

"Okay! Okay! No offense meant," Schanke replied. "I'm just used to working with old farts like Knight here."

*<He has no idea **how** old!>* Nick Sent.

John suppressed a giggle. "I understand," he said levelly. "I'll be back soon. Please review the files I brought so we'll be on an even footing when we begin working together."

Schanke nodded and John left with Nick in tow. Nick let John drive the Caddy - he was feeling too ill to do so himself - and, once they were safely back at 101 Gateway, Nick told John, "Take the car, you may need the trunk space. It's getting *late*."

"I know," John agreed. He could *feel* dawn approaching even though first light was a while away yet. "I'm going to be inside most of the day. If I need to catch a nap, I'll park myself on a sofa someplace. What about *you*?"

"I'll be okay. Just get going. We'll talk later."

Nick disappeared through his front door before John could say anything else. He followed Nick's orders and took the Caddy back to the precinct.

The moment Nick was inside he dialed Natalie's number. She picked up after the second ring. "Nat, it's me. I'm afraid I have some very bad news...."

*****

Natalie sighed as she hung up the phone. *Something* was very wrong here, she just *knew* it but she couldn't quite figure out *what* it was. Part of her wanted to rush right over to Nick's place and find out what was *really* bothering him but a small voice inside her head screamed at her, "No, don't do it!" She couldn't recall ever feeling this confused about Nick.

Then again, he never kissed her like *that* before....!

She grabbed her medical bag and her purse and headed out the door at a trot.

*****

Dragutin watched in stony silence as Romulus/Nick tucked the unconscious body of Nick/Romulus in the guest room bed. The mage looked more angry than concerned; He thought what Romulus was about to do was contemptible in the extreme. Seducing Knight's mortal lady friend was *not* a part of the plan! He had only agreed to perform the "Body Thief" ritual so Romulus could get his revenge by destroying LaCroix, or, barring that outcome, he planned to help Romulus trick LaCroix into admitting to being responsible for killing Divia.

He did *not* want to see Romulus ruin Nick's life. And Dragutin had spent enough time in the company of the wily Enforcer to *know* that Romulus could've bedded the Virgin Mary if he'd set his mind to it. Dr. Lambert would *not* be able to refuse the Enforcer, especially if Romulus was using any of his mental tricks to enhance his own innate sensuality.

"You are *not* going to do this," Dragutin told him.

"Oh, come now. I'm only going to be giving her what she wants! Ever since Nick sat up on her table, the good doctor has been hot for him," Romulus replied, a sly smile curling the corner of his mouth. "And, unlike Knight, I can bed a mortal *without* fear of killing them. You see, there *are* advantages to being of the Old Blood other than just having seen a lot of history."

"I won't let you do this."

"Why? What should you care?" Romulus queried eyeing the mage strangely.

"Because, when all of this is over, Nick has to go back to living with these people," Dragutin explained. "You can't alter the relationships he has established with them just to suit your own perverse whims."

"You think Nick wants to be *just friends* with Natalie? He'd fuck her in a New York minute if he was capable of boffing without biting. He's only friends with her because he doesn't have the inner strength to keep the Beast Within from manifesting whenever he gets *that* close to a mortal. Someday he'll figure it out, if he lives long enough. In the meantime, let's give the lovely lady a little incentive to stick around." Romulus paused, his expression one of pure deviltry, and added, "She isn't going to wait around *forever*. Nick is going to have to do *something* to keep her interested in hanging around and, since he can't, I ***will.***"

"You won't." Dragutin stated his eyes glowing red-gold.

"You're going to stop me?" Romulus challenged, his tone mocking.

Dragutin raised his right hand and many-hues of red flames crackled around it slowly coalescing into a ball. "I'm the only one who *can* stop you. And, although you are very strong, you are *not* fireproof!"

"And you're not scratchproof!" Romulus shot back as the nails on each of his fingers suddenly extended out into four-inch-long razor-sharp talons.

Dragutin saw his friend's whole body change as well - not grossly, but enough to be noticeably different. He now had a distinctly feral quality to him. His eyes were wolfish - gold with flecks of black - and he was growling in a low threatening manner.

"Nick?" a voice from downstairs called. "Nick, are you here?"

It was Natalie. "*Shit!*" Romulus muttered under his breath. "Her timing sucks."

Dragutin heard him. He smiled craftily and called, "He's up here in the guest room, Doctor."

"You son of a bitch!" Romulus snarled, wolf eyes flashing pure fire. "You *know* damn well I can't instantly reverse this change!"

"So? I think it's time the good doctor knew the *truth*," Dragutin said pointedly. "That Nick isn't human and that the whole Ritual of Life thing was a hoax."

"NO!" Romulus Commanded, his eyes catching Dragutin's at exactly that moment, insuring his Ancient powers would have a chance of working on the wizard, even though the other man did have defenses that made him harder than normal to control.

Dragutin hesitated, his momentarily loss of concentration made the fireball he held cupped in his hand evaporate into the nothingness from which it had taken shape. However, his defenses kicked in and, although he lost the spell he had prepped, he still had control over his thoughts and his will.

"Not this time, Old Man," he said closing the distance between them in an eyeblink. "You will listen to *me* now. Nick doesn't live his life between his legs and neither will *you*, so long as you have possession of Nick's body. If you do *anything* that would compromise Nick's friendships, job or personal ethics I *will* reverse the spell. I don't need your cooperation to undo the magic. To put it bluntly my friend, you will be Nick Knight only as long as I ***LET*** you."

"I never should have rescued you from Roanoke!" Romulus spat. "I should have let you burn with the rest of them!"

Dragutin ignored the Ancient's harsh words. He knew Romulus meant none of it - he was just angry because he couldn't have his own way. The mage *did* owe Romulus his life - the Ancient vampyre did rescue him and his Master from the doomed Colonial settlement - but he quickly found out that Romulus never did anything for purely altruistic reasons.

Dragutin and his Sire had their lives in exchange for teaching the Roman to read Magick - a language only those meant to be trained in the arts were ever shown. They had to give Romulus the means to learn what his Bloodline was never meant to know. It was because he had been coerced into teaching the Enforcer the ways of Magick that Dragutin had become the companion of the Roman after his Sire met Final Death at the hands of a mob of incensed witch hunters. After all, *someone* had to make sure the Enforcer didn't abuse his newfound powers....

It was through the knowledge gained by reading Magick that Romulus learned how to manipulate his body, making things, like the hideous claws he was now sporting, appear. Romulus could have been a mage in his own right, but Dragutin refused to give him the training he needed to be a true spellcaster. He saw what Romulus did with what powers he gained on his own and he wanted no part in making the Ancient any more lethal than he was already.

Natalie's footfalls coming up the stairs were audible to both Vampires. Romulus-as-Nick hissed like a cornered cat before evaporating into a cloud of mist that wafted noiselessly and unseen off to the bathroom down the hall. Dragutin only smiled - Romulus was expending an awesome amount of energy to power all of these body alterations and he *knew* his friend would not be able to keep this up for much longer.

<*Good*> Dragutin thought. <*Let her see him need to feed and that will be the end of this little ruse....*>

Natalie didn't recognize the voice that called out to her but it was obvious he seemed to know who she was. She didn't like the fact that Nick didn't come downstairs to greet her. She already had a bad feeling about coming over to the loft and now her fears were really beginning to multiply. She wasn't sure who she should be more concerned for - Nick or herself.

What if this stranger was one of LaCroix's friends? She could be walking right into a trap. And Nick could be....? She didn't want to think about what LaCroix would do to Nick now, especially if he really had been made mortal again.

She wasn't so sure if she believed it really happened. If he'd come in with some scientific explanation of what had been done to reverse his condition, she would have had an easier time accepting the possibility. But this Ritual of Life mumbo jumbo....? Natalie just plain didn't buy it.

She was pulled out of her reverie by the sudden appearance of a handsome ebony haired man at the top of the stairs. "Dr. Lambert, I presume?" he greeted formally taking her hand.

Natalie gasped as a chill went through her at the touch of this strange man's hand. His dark eyes scanned her appraisingly and a slight smile played on his lips.

"Uh....Yes," she stammered after managing to get her wits back. In her humble opinion, this man was drop dead gorgeous and she had no idea Nick had friends (or enemies) that looked *this* good. "Where's Nick?"

"In the bathroom," he said. "Stomach flu's can be, well, uncomfortable."

She allowed him to escort her to Nick's bedroom. The bed did look like it had been slept in, so perhaps Nick's tale of not being well was true after all. But she still wondered about the being human part....

"Nat?" she heard a familiar voice query weakly from behind.

She turned and saw Nick coming through the door. He was pale and his eyes were a bit glazed, almost feverish looking, and he staggered more than walked back to his bed.

When she reached out to touch his face, he caught her hand and said, "Some welcome back to the human race, huh, Nat?"

"You'll live," she replied and he smiled slightly.

He looked over at the dark haired man and said, "Natalie, this is Dragutin Ladislav. He's the one who performed the Ritual responsible for my return to humanity and, well, indirectly for my being here feeling like death on a soda cracker."

"Illness is a part of being human, Nick," Dragutin reminded him. "Besides, it will soon pass."

Nick cringed at the bad pun and Natalie chuckled softly.

"I'll leave Nick in your hands now, Doctor. I have my own patient to attend to," Dragutin said as he bowed gracefully and headed for the door.

"Patient?" Natalie queried.

"An Ancient," Nick interjected before Dragutin had the chance to respond. "He's staying here in my guest room. He...He helped Dragutin do the magic that brought me back."

"What happened to him?"

"He's in Torpor." When Natalie shot him a puzzled look, Nick added quickly, "It's a vampire thing, you wouldn't understand."

"Try me," she said pointedly, glaring at Nick. She had dealt with enough "vampire things" that he would have to work *really hard* to faze her at his point.

"He's, like, in a coma but it's not the same as when a mortal goes into a coma. He's aware to an extent of what's going on around him but he can't do anything physically about it. If he communicates with anyone, it's done by Mind Speech only and, well, he hasn't been all that talkative. You see, I didn't know it but he'd been

badly wounded before he came up here to Toronto and doing the Ritual just burned him all the rest of the way out. Dragutin says he's going to recover."

Nick climbed back into the bed and, after settling in continued, "Torpor isn't permanent. It's kinda what happened to me after I was hit by that pipe bomb. I was hurt too badly to heal myself consciously, so my body just shut down all that had to do with keeping me awake and focused all of its energy on healing my injuries. Only bad thing about Torpor is, when you do come up out of it, you are ravenously hungry, which was why I was such a wild man when I woke up on your table. I ***had*** to eat and you ***almost*** became lunch because you were between me and the food!"

Natalie remembered that night. If she hadn't had that cache of blood on hand, then Nick probably would have killed her considering how deep in blood frenzy he was when he woke up.

It was hard to believe that the fair-haired man with the most heavenly blue eyes she had ever seen was the same fiend who had come close to killing her on the first night they met. Looking at him now, it seemed like the fiend and the man were two different people. But Natalie knew better. The Beast had always been in there, biding its time, just waiting for the opportunity to strike....

Now it appeared the Beast had finally been slain. Was Nick really free....?

"Dragutin, do you have anything in your bag of tricks that works on Montezuma's Revenge?" Nick asked, his blue eyes full of untapped mischief.

"Sorry, no." the mage replied smiling slightly. He was halfway out the door when he added as an afterthought, "Besides, medicinal potions are Alchemist skills, not Magickal ones."

Nick sighed rolling his eyes and sunk back heavily into the pillow. Natalie chuckled softly and smiled to herself when she saw the door close with a noiseless click behind the mage. Alone at last! She gazed over at Nick and, when their eyes met, it seemed for a brief instant she saw that same flicker of unspent passion that she had seen earlier in the evening. But the fire died as quickly as it flared and Nick turned away from her gazing sightlessly at the wall.

"Nick, what is it? What's wrong?" she asked edging closer. She gently caressed his cheek, which brought his attention back to her, and he took her hand kissing it.

"I don't have a stomach virus," he said softly. He dared to look up into her dark eyes and *felt* the love she had for him. *The love Natalie had for Nick.* Dragutin was wrong about the relationship between Nick and the Coroner, the Enforcer surmised. They *did* love each other. The fact that their love had never been consummated was, in his humble opinion, just a minor oversight, something easily corrected....

Nick/Romulus sighed to himself and, in a thoughtful tone that only barely concealed the pain of his disappointment, he continued, "The spell didn't work. I got sick because the magick didn't take and my body did what it did when I was first brought across eight centuries ago. It's like I'm going through the first day after my Embrace all over again. I'll be back to normal by tonight."

"Dragutin knows all of this, I take it?"

"Yes, but I told him to let me tell you the bad news. I know it was kind of dumb to think I could come back using magic but I figured, well, it couldn't hurt to try. And it *seemed* to work. For a while there I *did* feel different. The Hunger was gone. When I held you in my arms, I didn't have the urge to, well, you know...."

He let the thought trail off as two blood tears began to slowly course their way down his cheeks. "Let's just act like none of this ever happened, okay?"

"I'm so sorry. I wish it *had* worked. I know how much you wanted it to-"

"It's okay," he interrupted. "There's always the chance one of your formulas will be the one to do it."

Nick's confidence in her made Natalie smile in spite of how the poor turn of events was making her feel. She loved him all the more for his faith in her and his

desire to persevere despite all the bad luck. She gently wiped away his blood tears with a Kleenex and stopped herself short of getting him to blow his sniffly nose.

He took the tissue from her and wiped his nose. Nick seemed to regain his composure back quickly and, when he sat up, he took Natalie by surprise when he drew her into his arms holding her close.

"Thank you for being here for me," he whispered in her ear.

"Nick, I'm...I'm your friend," she replied. "I'll always be there for you."

He parted from her just enough so they could be facing one another. "I love you, Natalie. I just wish....things were different."

"So do I."

He kissed her and again she felt a tingle that went straight to her toes. Her whole body was beginning to be enveloped by a flush of warmth, as his kiss deepened and his hands gently removed her blazer letting it drop soundlessly to the floor. She allowed herself to be guided down on her back on the bed, wiggling her feet so her shoes would come off before her feet were up on the bed. Nick was halfway on top of her still brushing her lips and cheek with his lips. She lay with her head in the crook of his left arm while his free right hand deftly opened the buttons of her blouse and popped the front hook securing her bra.

She moaned with pleasure, as his lips worked their way down her throat to her breasts which were taut with desire and his free hand found its way under her skirt to the parts yearning for his touch. He deftly removed her hose and underwear while Natalie's attention was completely consumed by her growing desire, the passion being fueled by the magic Nick's tongue was working on her exposed flesh. He edged slowly downward until his head was buried between her thighs. Natalie's fingers burrowed into Nick's hair holding onto him as though fearing he would vanish if she let go, her grip on him tightening to the point of almost causing him physical pain.

The sensations coursing through Natalie's body were nothing she had ever experienced in her entire life. He was doing things to her with his tongue that she didn't think was humanly possible. But, then again, Nick *wasn't* human. Is this how vampires made love, she wondered for a fleeting instant. Natalie cried out involuntarily when she felt her whole body convulse with the spasms of intense release. Nick had given her more pleasure with his mouth and the touch of his hands than she had ever experienced sexually with any other man.

As her body calmed, Natalie released her grip on Nick and he rolled over onto his back and began massaging his head. "Oh, thank God, there's still hair back there!" he said half-seriously.

Natalie didn't acknowledge the comment. She was *still* too overcome by what had just happened to do anything more than lie there basking in the afterglow. Soon the long day caught up with her and a sleep promising to be full of many wonderful dreams overtook her.

<I thought we agreed you weren't going to-> Nick/Romulus heard Dragutin chide in his head but he cut off the admonition.

<I didn't boff her,> Romulus Sent back. *<Just got myself a reminder of why Prince calls that part of the body "sugar walls". And, besides, what I did is something Nick could do, if he ever really sat down and thought about it. I mean, come on, after eight centuries with Janette, the guy must have at least some clues about how to please women....>*

<He may, but did it ever occur to you that Nick might not ***want*** *a physical relationship with this woman? That perhaps friendship was all he desired from Doctor Lambert?>*

<I think you've been breathing in too much of that funky powder you carry, my friend. Nick's hot for her, all right. I Read that much during the Body Exchange. He's just afraid he'd hurt her if he acted on his feelings. I, on the other hand, have a lot more self-control.>

<Oh, really?>

<Hey, I kept it in my pants, didn't I?>

<You are a pig.> Dragutin stated. *<Wipe her memory. Nick will never be able to duplicate your actions. Why leave her wanting a repeat of this night when you know she'll never be able to get it until Nick finds his cure?>*

<I can't Wipe her - she's too strong willed. I can , however, convince her it was all just a very pleasant dream.>

<Do it, then. And, if you ever repeat this with any other of Knight's female acquaintances, I will reverse my magick. Understood?>

<Yes. > Romulus agreed and then transferred part of his mental energies to the task of arranging Natalie's memory of their time together to something more....acceptable. Before he drifted off to sleep with his head resting on the breasts of the slumbering Natalie, Romulus Sent Dragutin this last thought, *<If you'd been here, you would have agreed it was nice to see this one made so very happy....>*

*****

Natalie sat up with a start. She glanced at the clock - 4:30pm it said. Had she really slept that long? She remembered coming over to the loft shortly before dawn to check up on Nick but everything after that was a blur. All her clothing - with the exception of the undergarments she had on - was neatly folded on top of the dresser and her purse and medical bag were plopped next to it.

She looked around the room. Nick wasn't there. She was alone but she heard someone moving about downstairs - Nick, she quickly assumed. He had apparently given her his room for the night. It seemed also took care of her things - she didn't remember getting undressed and into bed. Had he done that too?

Well, if he did, that would explain all the erotic dreams she had during the night. Some of them were so vivid they felt almost ***real***....

"Nat?" she heard a familiar voice query .

When she turned she saw Nick peeking in the doorway. He was dressed for work and was eyeing her curiously. "You feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, fine," she answered unsurely. "What happened?"

"You came over here to check up on me because I was kinda sick last night and then you went off and fainted on me!"

"I ***what***?"

"You passed out. My medical degree may be a century out of date, but I know exhaustion when I see it. I gave you my room and I crashed out downstairs. I, uh, well, I made you as comfortable as I could...." he let the thought trail off, blushing slightly because she was standing there before him clad only in her underwear.

Natalie suddenly realized how almost naked she was and she quickly scooped up her clothing saying, "Give me a minute to get myself together and we'll talk, okay?"

Nick nodded and left her alone again. There was something not exactly right but she couldn't figure out *what* yet. Natalie didn't buy the "you fainted on me" story Nick just told her. She *may* have fainted - but she doubted it happened from purely natural causes. Someone or something knocked her out and removed her recollection of the night's events.

Another one of Nick's "vampire things that I wouldn't understand", Natalie thought to herself as she dressed. This was beginning to get tiresome. Nick trusted her enough to let her experiment on him in the hopes of getting him *out* of his vampiric existence, yet he didn't trust her enough to let her know exactly *what* it was he had had enough of. And she was smart enough to know that having to live on a blood diet wasn't the only reason Nick wanted out.

As soon as she was dressed, Natalie left Nick's room and was about to go downstairs when she heard a soft moaning coming from the second bedroom. She quietly tiptoed to the door, which was slightly adjar, and peeked in. Natalie gasped in surprise as she recognized the person lying half asleep in the guest bed - it was The Enforcer who had appeared out of the blue on Nick's doorstep last July during the Forever Knight War and had taken the newly made vampire John Dencoff off with him for parts unknown to study the vampire lifestyle.

What the hell was that Enforcer doing here? Natalie was *really* beginning to get concerned. And why was he staying with Nick? Was Nick in some kind of trouble?

She quietly drew back away from the door and crept noiselessly downstairs. The first thing that hit her nose as she entered the kitchen was the small of freshly brewed coffee. The second was the odor from the Quiche Lorraine that was cooling on a trivet near the oven.

The dream of every working woman, Natalie mused as a playful smile curved her lips, is having a man at home that can ***cook***!

Nick must have sensed (or Read) what she was thinking for he said giving her a naughty look, "If you want to really see me cook, we could always go back upstairs...."

"Nick!" she cried mildly shocked.

He laughed giving her a "Gotcha!" look and she turned away, not able to believe she fell for one of his silly schoolboy tricks. He really was a piece of work sometimes. Maybe that was why she was falling in love with him...!

"The coffee is a little strong. It'll be like forty thousand volts going through your body screaming to every nerve fiber, "**WAKE UP**"!"

She giggled. Nick was acting like a wild man morning DJ as he was giving her the coffee spiel and she loved the impression. He was in a really good mood and she did a double-take when she saw him actually *drink* some of that electric coffee he'd just been hustling to her.

"Nick?" Natalie began. "Coffee?"

He shrugged, a little sheepishly, and gave her a weak smile. "Well, yeah, I've kinda graduated to Java Black. It's not straight up but it's *mostly* coffee...."

She closed the distance between them. "How long have you been mixing your drinks?"

"A. . . while. I - I just thought it couldn't hurt to do some experimenting on my own. Last night I really botched it, though. I, well I *thought* I could handle something solid, so I kind of dug into the donuts and-"

"And got yourself good and sick," she finished for him.

Nick turned away embarrassed and she just shook her head smiling slightly. "Why don't you just let **me** be the judge of what you're able to handle dietetically, okay?"

"Okay."

There were times when Nick could be such a little boy! Natalie sighed and, remembering what she *really* wanted to talk about, Natalie caught him by the arm. When her turned to face her, she asked, "What is the infamous Ron the Enforcer doing here? I *thought* didn't want to have anything to do with those people."

Her question took Nick completely by surprise and, in his current state of being, this was no easy feat. He was genuinely flustered when he responded, "Well....um, he was kind of helping me with a case."

"What case?"

"The weird one. You know, the exploding bullets? The one where the victims were left as piles of ashes?"

She nodded. "I gather this case is going to fall under that catch-all phrase of yours, "It's a vampire thing, I just wouldn't understand," right?"

"No, not quite," he said meeting her gaze. "It ***is*** a vampire thing, but it's one that crossed the line. That's why The Enforcers are up here. *They* want to catch the killer before we do. They think he or she is Kindred, um, I mean a Vampire. *That's* why they're here in Toronto and why I've got the leader of the team assigned to this case asleep in my guest room."

"Who is his partner?"

"John Dencoff. And there's another person, but he isn't an Enforcer. He's a Mage."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Natalie replied thoughtfully. "Why ***you***?"

"You know any other Vampire Detectives?"

"Not off-hand," she said casting him a look that let him know that she knew he hadn't told her *everything* and wasn't about to let him off without a full explanation this time.

"Nat, I've bent the Code enough as it is by telling you *this* much!" he blurted out. "That Enforcer sleeping upstairs isn't just anybody. He's an Ancient."

"What does that mean?"

"It means he's on the same power level as LaCroix, maybe even more, I don't know. What I **do** know is that, if he was to wake up now and see you here, he'd probably hand me my head. And I don't mean that in the figurative sense."

Natalie saw the fear in his eyes and cast a quick glance up at the second floor. In a quieter tone she asked, "So they're watching you?"

"Well, I don't know if you remember what happened last night-"

"Vaguely," she said. "I had a lot of strange dreams. In one of them you came into my office all thrilled that some magic spell made you human."

"That wasn't a dream," Nick told her. "That happened." Before she could respond, he continued, "But the magick didn't take and I got real sick, like a massive case of Montezuma's Revenge, because I came out of the Ritual famished and ate all kinds of junk my body rejected when the spell wore off. I was so sick....! I can't remember ever feeling *that* bad! Not even any of your vile concoctions ever messed me up that much!" He caught an annoyed look from her and added apologetically, "Well, I didn't mean it *that* way! It's just that, well, some of those protein shakes are, like, you know, totally gross."

"But you're better now?"

"Sort of," he replied smiling weakly. "I'm not living in the bathroom anymore. But I *do* feel really shagged out. I'm still going in tonight, though. I promised Schanke I'd be there and I need to talk to John."

"What about your friend upstairs?"

"He's not going to be much help right now. He's. . . . recovering. It's, well. . . . "

"A Vampire thing I wouldn't understand," she volunteered and he nodded. "What have you gotten yourself into *THIS* time, Nick?"

"Nothing I can't handle," he assured her in a firm tone.

"In other words, Natalie, mind your own business."

"I didn't say that!"

"Than what *are* you saying?"

"Everything will be back to normal as soon as I solve this oddball case. The Enforcers will be gone the day they or I catch the killer."

"But *they* want to be there first."

"Exactly," Nick agreed. "And this is one I wouldn't mind losing. There would be *too many* unanswered questions. It would be better all around if The Enforcers got their man and Metro got another item added to the "Unsolved" file."

"So I gather you aren't trying too hard to find this person."

"No, I ***AM*** trying!" Nick shot back mildly insulted. "But the Enforcers consider this to be *their* investigation and the perp is *their* perp. That's why John Dencoff has been riding with Schanke and will be riding with me tonight. He's the Enforcer's eyes and ears with Metro. The other two people, Ron and his mystic associate, will only come in when and if we find something. They'll be working on their own elsewhere while John is with us."

Natalie sighed. "So, John is an Enforcer now?"

"More like and Enforcer-in-training," Nick corrected gently. "And it *was* his choice, after all. He seems to be handling it all pretty well."

*<And **you** seem to be handling it pretty well too!>* a voice teased lightly in his mind. Then, he added, *<Sorry, Nick, but I'm not near a phone and you are needed! Schanke and I are on to something. We **may** have our man!>*

<Where are you?> Nick/Romulus Sent.

*<A warehouse. **The** warehouse. You know, the one where you let LaCroix have it. Uncle's never really forgiven you for **that.**>*

<Good. Maybe LaCroix might just show up and tell me so himself.>

<Let's hope not! We've got a murderer to catch, remember?>

<Yes, I'll be along shortly.>

Natalie noticed Nick looking distracted for a few seconds and was about to ask him about it when he said, "I've got to go. John says he and Schanke have a major lead and I'm needed."

"How...?"

"John's a telepath," Nick explained. "He's a bit more gifted with his mental talents than I am. Either that, or his Master is bothering to teach him how to make the most of whatever it is he's got. In either case, I've got to fly. See you later!"

He kissed her lips goodbye and departed through the only open window in the loft before Natalie had a chance to get a word in. Nick was always inhumanly fast but he had moved with a fleetness Natalie couldn't recall ever seeing before. She also couldn't recall the last time he ever kissed her goodbye on the mouth....

Something was going on and Natalie felt there was only one person who could give her a straight answer. But would he?

She screwed up her courage and walked determinedly up the steps to where the Enforcer lay asleep in the guest room....

*****

Alexandra peered up of the dust covered window. She could see the green Caddy parked in the dirt near the building but there was no sign of Nick. There were, however, two other men by the car. One she guessed from what LaCroix had said was Nick's human partner. The younger man with him she didn't recognize but she did *know* he wasn't human - she could *feel* he was like her, a vampyre.

The first time she tried to get her revenge on Nick Knight she had failed miserably - and had also just barely gotten away with her life. *This* time, however, she had the perfect plan. Her childer were more than happy to have the chance to play at being Hunters. They had fun toying with the fancy guns LaCroix had so generously provided. And, as they all discovered, no vitae was sweeter than that which came from a Kindred....

Her plan was ***so*** simple! She would capture Nick, bind him, drink him dry and leave him for the sun to claim. Drain him of his life's blood and leave him to die the way he had done to her! Her childer were strong enough to hold him. Although he was *older* than her sons by many years, Alexandra *knew* Nick didn't have the strength one his age should have because his diet was so poor. His desire for humanity had made him weak and it was this weakness she intended to exploit.....

She glanced back into the room at her *family.* Her three *sons* all looked vaguely like her - fair-haired, blue-eyed and athletically built - but their eyes gave them away as being something other than human. Their eyes betrayed their dark secret - all of them had a killer's eyes. And all of them also had their mother's lust for vengeance. They kept out of sight of the windows while they awaited Alexandra's signal to make their move....

*****

John glanced up at the upper floor window of the warehouse. He *knew* there were vampires in there and that they were watching him. The slaughterhouse where Nick and LaCroix had had their last battle was next door - apparently he had been *wrong* about finding their target in there but the proximity to the old locale was still ominous.

Schanke shot John a look. "You **did** call for backup, didn't you?" he said sharply obviously not at all convinced the young agent knew what he was doing.

"Yes," John told him, his tone one of annoyance. Schanke had been testing him all day and John was beginning to lose his patience with the mortal detective. "Our assistance will be here soon."

"Then maybe we should have a look around instead of standing here like a couple of sitting ducks."

"If they wanted to attack us, they would have done so already," John said calmly. "They are on the second floor watching us from that window," John indicated the spot with a tilt of his head. "I think they are waiting for something. Or someone."

This bit of information caught Schanke a little off-guard. "You saw them?" he queried.

"Yes," John said, telling a half-truth. He hadn't actually *seen* them, at least in the way Schanke meant, but he did *know* where they were and what they were doing. He also sensed there were four of them - which was why he wanted Nick to be there. John knew alone he was no match for them but with Nick and possibly Dragutin present and Schanke as backup, they would have a good chance of taking them down.

Dragutin! John suddenly realized he hadn't asked Nick to bring the wizard along with him! John quickly Sent a Call forth to the mage but, for some odd reason, he couldn't seem to make the connection. . . .

*****

Natalie tentatively opened the door to the guest room. The Enforcer was lying motionless on the bed, he looked so pale and still Natalie thought for a moment he was dead. When she reached out her hand to touch him, The Enforcer's eyes snapped open and he was looking straight at her.

Natalie jumped, startled. The she said quietly, "I'm Natalie, a friend of Nick's. I-I would like to ask you a question."

He didn't respond - he just continued to stare at her with those cold gold eyes. Then the hard look softened, almost as if he realized who she was and *knew* she was someone he could trust, and his expression changed drastically. He suddenly looked like he was pleading with her for help.

"Something I could do for you, Doctor?" a soft voice inquired from behind.

Natalie spun around and saw Dragutin standing a step behind her. He had an inquiring eye on her and she stammered, "I-I want to ask The Enforcer a question."

"He cannot speak. I know it *looks* like he is awake but he is in a sort of limbo between true wakefulness and sleep. Torpor is an odd condition and he won't be

able to communicate normally for a while."

"Maybe you can help me, then. Something is wrong with Nick. He's different. I know a spell was cast on him by you to make him human and it failed but I am not blaming you for that. I doubt you are responsible for his personality change. But maybe you know what happened to him."

"I do know and, unfortunately, I am partially to blame for Nick's. . . attitude adjustment," Dragutin said softly. "However, I cannot tell you anything except this: when The Enforcers complete their mission here, the Nick you know and care for will return."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"It means the Ritual I did altered Nick's psyche but that the change isn't permanent. He's also physically different as well as psychologically different. I was asked to make him more powerful so that he could fight this killer of our kind on a more equal footing."

Natalie looked at The Enforcer, whose gaze was riveted on her, and asked, "What about him? Wasn't he supposed to help?"

"The Ritual that was to make Nick human put Ron into Torpor. He was wounded before we came here and the magick I did drained him to near death. He *will* recover but-"

"Is there a way to speed his recovery?"

"Why?"

"Nick said he was an Ancient. You may *need* him to fight the Hunters. I guess making Nick stronger was a good idea in light of what happened to Ron but can you use your magic to help Ron get better faster?"

"That. . . that would be risky."

"To who? Him?" she asked shooting The Enforcer, who *still* had that pleading helpless look on his face, a glance. "Or you?"

"Nick," he said. "If I awaken Ron, he'll go after Nick. I don't think I need to tell you who would win *that* fight."

"Why is he after Nick?"

"He broke the Code. You know what he is. Not only that, but you are trying to cure him, like he has a disease." Dragutin's eyes changed from their normal deep brown to gold as he continued, "You **can't** cure Nick. We are not mortals afflicted with some strange illness. W are different from you like a cat is different from a mouse. You can't make the cat a mouse, Doctor Lambert, no matter how many protein drinks you pour down it's throat."

Natalie backed away from him. Although he didn't bare his fangs, she knew they were probably there just hidden behind his impassive lips. Dragutin no longer looked *human* - he wore the same cold dead face she had seen others of his kind wear when they were about to do something offensive with their powers. . . .

Suddenly, for no reason she could fathom, Dragutin looked away from her toward the door and was gone in an eyeblink. Where he went, she had no clue, but she breathed a sigh of relief because Natalie was sure Dragutin would have attacked her had he not been called away.

Natalie looked at the mysterious Ron. There was **something** about the way he was looking at her. . .

<Help me...>

Natalie gasped. She heard a voice in her head. It *sounded* like Nick but Nick was off in pursuit of a killer. She reached out to touch The Enforcer and he seemed to relax when she caressed his cheek.

<Blood. . .in the fridge. . .need it. . get it!>

"Are you talking to me?" Natalie asked The Enforcer.

<Yes. Help me.>

"You promise *not* to hurt me if I help you?"

<*Yes.*>

Natalie inhaled deeply steeling herself for the next move. "Okay." she told him. "I'll help you. But then you must promise me two things. You won't hurt me and you won't hurt Nick. Deal?"

<*Yes.*>

Natalie took off and got all the bottles and bags of blood Nick had in the refrigerator guessing that Ron would need a lot of blood to heal whatever was wrong with him. She fed him the blood, one glass at a time, and, at first The Enforcer could do nothing more than swallow what was poured into his mouth. However, after he had consumed a couple of bags, he was able to sit up and take the bottles into his own hands and empty them one after the other. His eyes were glowing bright gold and his fangs were out making him look more like an animal than a man but he tried his best to keep Natalie from seeing him so Changed.

When he drank the last of the blood, he dropped the empty bottle on to the bed and turned to face Natalie. His eyes were still glowing gold but his fangs were not evident. He was wearing a face of contained fury but his voice was level as he said, "You want to help Nick. Fine. We will go to him. **NOW!**"

He and Natalie were airborne before she had a chance to speak a word in protest.

*****

Nick landed between the slaughterhouse and the warehouse and used the shadows to cloak him as he moved in on John and Schanke. John nearly jumped ten feet in the air - no real challenge for the young vampire but it would've freaked Schanke to see *that* move - when Nick tapped him on the shoulder.

"Nick, how did you-"

"Relax, John," Nick said cutting him off before he had the chance to ask how Nick had managed to catch him off-guard. "They're in there, right?" Nick was looking exactly in the spot where John *knew* the suspects were hiding .

"Yes. They're up there," John said aloud then Sent, <*What do you want to do now?*>

<*Move in. Just us. I'll have Schanke cover the rear. I don't want him to get hurt. This could get ugly. You* ***sure*** *you want to->*

<*I can handle it.*>

Nick caught Schanke's eye. "You ready?"

"Where's our backup? The kid was *supposed* to-"

"*I'm* your backup," Nick told him. He closed the distance between himself and the annoyed mortal detective and, using his innate ability to control the mind and will of others, ordered, "You will cover the back door and see that no one leaves alive."

Schanke looked a little confused for a split second and stood there shaking his head and blinking his eyes. He gave Nick a puzzled look and asked, "What did you say?"

Romulus/Nick was momentarily taken aback. Mortals usually obeyed his orders the first time they were given. Knight must have done something to this one, Romulus/Nick thought. He tried again, using the longer but more assured method: he locked eyes with Schanke, their heartbeats were in unison and, in an icy tone, he Commanded, "Cover the back door and let no one pass. Understood?"

"Right. . .Right, I'll go around back and make sure they don't try and make a break for the back door."

Schanke took off leaving Nick and John on their own.

John saw what Nick did and stated, "You didn't have to do that."

Nick's expression was one of cold determination when he retorted, "We have a job to do. A mortal shouldn't even **be** here. It's a violation of The Code."

"Since when do you care-"

Nick grabbed John by the collar cutting him off. His eyes were red gold and his voice had an inhuman ring to it as he interrupted, "Your job is to be my backup. I *hope* you will be up to the task. In my opinion, Lavinia ordered you into the field far too soon. . ."

John's eyes widened at hearing the name of the Ancient whom he served. How did Nick know about her? He also wondered how Nick was able to hold him suspended two feet off the ground so effortlessly. Nick was strong, even by their standards, but John knew he was not normally ***this*** strong.

"Put me down, Nick!" John ordered. "What's with you? I'm on your side, remember?"

Nick hesitated for a moment before releasing John. He was *still* vamped out when he stalked off towards the warehouse where he *knew* the enemy was waiting and John had to move double time to keep up with him.

******

Alexandra saw Nick with John nipping at his heels heading into the building. She turned to her childer saying, "Time to play, boys."

They were gone in a whirl of dust and scattered trash.

******

"Nick, we could be walking right into a trap," John cautioned.

Nick made no reply. He stopped once they were inside the dark abandoned building. He could see perfectly, as could John, and Nick sensed the sudden presence of three others - they were surrounded - and Nick stopped walking and stood in the center of the room where he *knew* he would be easily seen.

"Come to arrest us, Detective?" one of the boys taunted.

"No," Nick replied.

"Where's the breather?" a different voice asked.

"None of your damn business."

"You wouldn't be so brave if you knew who was here waiting for you," a third voice announced.

Nick/Romulus Scanned the building. Other than the three young ones, there were two others within the warehouse. One he could just *barely* feel - he was that well shielded - but the other was easily found. Romulus/Nick had a feeling the real owner of the body he possessed must know the woman he sensed, for something in him registered her as familiar but the Romulus part didn't know her. But the man he barely felt Nick/Romulus knew instantly.

LaCroix was here! Nick/Romulus felt a sudden surge go through him as though he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning. Finally. . . !

A rush of air made Nick turn and he ducked in time to avoid being decapitated by the flashing blade of a katana that missed his head by inches. The young man wielding the sword was a Kendo master but his skill was no match for the speed and strength of an Ancient. Nick easily immobilized his assailant and disarmed him - literally.

John gasped in shock at the sight of Nick ripping the punk's sword arm off at the shoulder socket. The young man's agonized screams echoed through the cavernous building. As the wounded vampire stood there trying to stop his life's blood from pouring out of the gaping wound, Nick knocked him back and away ten feet using the youth's own arm as a cudgel. The wounded vampire smacked into a pile of crates that disintegrated under the force and the young vampire was buried under the rubble.

The other two punks saw what Nick did and both of them jumped him at the same time. They held Nick down pushing his face into the dusty floor trying to use their inhuman strength to break Nick's spine but *something* was keeping them from doing anything more than holding him immobile.

John intervened grabbing one of them and yanked him off Nick's back. The vampire then turned on John trying to strike at him but John managed to duck the wild blows being hurled mindlessly at him by the angry young man.

Once John removed one of the two men who had been trying to break his back, Nick sent the one left trying to hold him sailing across the room. He landed against the metal wall with a sickening crunch. A dark smudge blackened the wall as his limp body sank to the ground in a lifeless heap.

"No!" came woman's agonized scream from above and both Nick and John looked up in time to see Alexandra appear from out of nowhere to confront them. Her senses told her that two of her childer had met the Final Death and she *knew* who had slain them. "Leave him to ***me***!" she ordered her lone childe and he backed off disappearing into the shadows.

Alexandra then turned on Nick like a she-tiger defending her cubs. Her claws and fangs were out and she tried to rip him in half but he managed to dodge her enraged attack. She slashed at him like a madwoman but Nick was always a second or so too fast for her so Alexandra was never able to connect with him.

She came at him and at him until her breath was ragged with exhaustion and her blows were coming at him as nothing more than frenzied frustrated strikes at thin air. John noticed how tired she was but he also noticed that Nick hadn't even broke a sweat over this fight. He also noticed that Nick seemed to be enjoying his little game of cat and mouse with Alexandra.

Finally, Nick had had enough of her and he grabbed the exhausted Alexandra and held her fast. She was both too tired and too weak to struggle against the vise-like grip that secured her. As she drooped in the hands of her enemy, she heard Nick call out, "LaCroix, I know you are here! Very clever of you to convince this stupid bitch and her get to become murderers so that I would be called in to investigate. I give you points for ingenuity. But, now that I have my man, so to speak, there really isn't any reason for me to hang around here anymore."

"You can't arrest me," Alexandra stated in a husky voice. "The Code, remember?"

"She's *ours*, Nick," John reminded him.

Nick gave John a smile that was almost. . .evil. "I *know* she's yours. Take her."

Nick practically threw Alexandra at John and, if John had not been a vampire then he never would have caught her in time to keep her from landing face down on the ground.

"What's with you?" John asked his tone fearful.

Nick *felt* the fear in John and was enjoying the rush it gave him. He also felt the fear of another vampire in the room and it was because of that fear that Alexandra's last child was in Nick's arms in an eyeblink. "She's the mastermind behind the deaths of our people," Nick told John. "She's the one the Enforcers want. Her get are nothing. They will be left for the sun to claim."

"What of him?" John asked indicating the childe Nick held.

Nick's eyes were glowing gold red and his fangs were out, "You want him?" he asked.

John shook his head wide-eyed in terror.

"Good."

Nick plunged his canines into the throat of Alexandra's last childe and drained him until nothing was left but a pile of dust. . . .

John Dencoff couldn't believe what he had just seen. Had Nick gone off the deep end? Nick, who hadn't killed for blood in over a century just drained one of his own kind to the point of Final Death. The detective was covered in blood - both that of his meal as well as that of the other two childer of Alexandra he fought and destroyed. His eyes were *still* glowing red when Nick turned his gaze on John.

"Afraid of me, Johnny?" Nick taunted.

"Nick, calm down," John said trying to keep the fear out of his voice. "It's over. We have what we came for."

"**YOU** have what **YOU** came for, Enforcer," Nick replied icily. "I am not finished here yet."

"Personal vendettas are against the Code, Nick," John warned. "If you attack LaCroix unprovoked, I'll have to take you down."

Nick laughed in John's face. "Like you really have the power to take ***me*** on!"

"I'm not alone on this mission, Nick. Dragutin is on his way. *He* can stop you cold and *will* do so if I ask him to."

"He'll have to *find* me first!"

Nick was gone in a whoosh of air and dust and John, who was still in possession of the exhausted Alexandra, was too encumbered by his charge to give pursuit.

"Damn him!" John swore his eyes glowing red in anger and frustration. He forced Alexandra out of the building and, after knocking her unconscious, secured her by locking her in the trunk of Nick's Caddy. He then Scanned the area trying to *feel* for Nick and LaCroix but both of them apparently were Shielding themselves because he couldn't get a lock on either of them. . .

*****

Nick/Romulus entered the slaughterhouse through the roof leaving a gaping hole in his wake. He *knew* LaCroix was in there waiting for him and he was ready to face his old enemy. He landed in the packaging area and quickly made a makeshift stake via the destruction of one of the wooden crates. Now armed with the favored weapon of The Enforcers, Nick/Romulus went in search of his quarry.

LaCroix had seen Nick enter and thought it amusing that his "son" thought he could defeat his Master using an Enforcer's tool. A stake would immobilize a young vampire but, unless it hit him directly in the heart, LaCroix *knew* it would be useless against one as *old* as he was. Nick had been *lucky* that last encounter.

What mistakes were made back then would *not* be duplicated *this* time. . . .

"Nicholas!"

Nick spun around at the sound of his name. He held the stake in a tight grip but the hand holding it was at his side. Nick looked up and watched in silence as the white-haired Master vampire slowly glided downward and landed within ten paces of him.

LaCroix eyed Nick curiously. He had seen the fight between his childe and Alexandra's get and had to admit he was surprised by what he saw. He hadn't seen his "son" fight like **that** in centuries. And the way Nick killed Alexandra's last childe. . . .

He knew he had been away for a while but he had *not* expected to find Nick so changed. It was almost as if he was a completely different person. . . .

LaCroix's suspicions grew more intense when he tried to Read Nick and found a wall around his thoughts that he could not break through. He had not taught Nick how to Shield his mind. Apparently, his childe had found someone who was willing to fill in the gaps of his education.

"Nicholas, put that stick down and let's talk," LaCroix purred.

Nick's eyes glowed red. "No. First you have that bitch and her get go on a murder spree because you *know* that's the only way to attract my attention these days. Then you lure me *here*, to the site of our last confrontation. The one you **DIDN'T** walk away from. And you say you want to **TALK**? I may have my faults, Daddy Dearest, but being stupid isn't one of them!"

LaCroix's felt his own eyes start to glow. So, the boy *was* intent on challenging him. So be it.

The Master was on Nick in an eyeblink. He pinned his childe's arms so Nick couldn't use the stake and, with his mouth close to Nick's ear, whispered, "I *do* want to talk, Nicholas. And, well, using that stupid girl to get to you was, well, a little extreme perhaps but effective. And you never cease to amaze me. Imagine, my Nicholas cooperating with the Enforcers. Is it from them that you've learned your new tricks?"

"You would be *amazed* at what I've learned from them." Nick replied icily his eyes shining with an eerie inner light.

He let go of the stake and it fell to the floor with a clatter. Nick focused his attention on keeping his thoughts his own while LaCroix, who viewed Nick's dropping the stake as a sign of surrender, relaxed his grip on his childe. His touch was a caress as he slowly brought his hands up across Nick's body and, when he reached the collar of Nick's shirt, the buttons popped off as he ripped the shirt open baring Nick's throat.

Nick/Romulus knew exactly what LaCroix was going to do. He was going to Bind Nick to him so that Nick would never again be able to defy his Master's wishes. Fool though Nick might be, even *he* didn't deserve to spend his eternity Blood Bound to an Ancient. Nick/Romulus let go his control so that the Beast Within would start to take shape giving his body the form and power needed to fight for both the revenge he wanted so desperately as well as to prevent the body he inhabited from sharing his own dark fate.

Just as LaCroix's fangs were about to hit home, Nick broke free of his Master's grasp and slashed at LaCroix, the four-inch-long claws that looked like knives attached to his fingertips shredding through fabric, skin and muscle cutting all the way to the bone. The cut was like a hari kari slice - meant to disembowel - and bits of the Master's intestines could be seen peeking through the fabric of his ripped clothing. The blow caught LaCroix off-guard and he growled like a maddened tiger at Nick. The finger's on the Master's hands quickly sprouted a set of razor-sharp talons and, with one hand holding in the entrails that threatened to spill forth, LaCroix stayed his ground ready to fend off Nick's next charge.

Nick moved in on him again with a speed and ferocity LaCroix had never seen him display before but the Master was able to hold his childe at bay. He had never recalled seeing Nick this incensed - the boy fought like a man possessed! Although LaCroix knew his "son" had cause to be angry with him, he sensed there was something else fueling Nick's ire other than their old grievances with each other.

"Why are you doing this, Nicholas?" he asked through teeth gritted in pain.

"Because I want an answer! The *truth* this time!" Nick shot back, his breath ragged and sweat beginning to spot pink on his brow.

He was tiring and LaCroix sensed that he might soon be able to end this fight if he could just keep Nick busy a little while longer....

"An answer to what?"

"One question. Did you kill Divia? The one who made you?"

THAT inquiry made LaCroix's eyes widen slightly - which was the only clue he gave that the question had caught him completely by surprise - and he asked back, "Why does this matter to you?"

"Answer the fucking question or I'll rip your head off!" Nick screamed at him. Nick looked like he was on the verge of losing control completely. Letting out the Beast was not without it's price - LaCroix knew that fact only too well - and he also knew Nick was not making an idle threat. In his current state, Nick *was* capable of ripping off a Kindred's head - even an Ancient Kindred - and LaCroix wasn't about to take any chances. Besides, it cost him nothing to answer the boy's questions!

"Yes, I did kill her. Both she and her childe were, well, giving me some difficulties."

"So, you slay the Master, frame the Childe for her death and get the Ancients to agree to having that childe become one of The Enforcers so he'll stay out of your way," Nick stated.

"Exactly."

"I *knew* you did it, you bastard!" Nick spat. Now the sweat was running in pink streams down his temples and his clothing was darkened by perspiration down the back, under the arms and in spots on his chest. "And now Lavinia will know it too!"

"***WHAT!?***" LaCroix roared. "You wouldn't ***DARE***!"

Nick pulled out a small pocket recorder. "I got it all on tape! Empirical evidence. The one thing not even *your* powers can overcome! When Lavinia hears this, I will be free again and it will be ***YOU*** who will be bound to the Enforcers for a century and a day!"

"It cannot be!" LaCroix said wide-eyed as his expression became one of horrified recognition. "Romulus!"

Nick/Romulus smiled and nodded. "Nice to know you still remember me, Brother." He was gloating visibly when he concluded, "Enjoy your freedom. . . . while you still can!"

Nick/Romulus soared upwards bursting through the roof and into the nighttime sky. . . .

*****

Dragutin got to John moments after he put the unconscious Alexandra into the trunk of Nick's Caddy. He *felt* John's anger and frustration - the fledgling vampire hadn't yet mastered the skill of Shielding his thoughts or feelings - and he had to tune out John in order to reach out and *feel* for any other Kindred in the area.

After a few minutes, John asked, "Find Nick?"

"He is. . . still here. But the impression is. . . shaky."

"What do you mean?"

"He is Shielded but the control needed to maintain his invisibility to my Scan is breaking down. He is either wounded and focused on keeping himself alive or his attention if absorbed completely in some task. I can't tell which because I can't lock on to his mind for *that* is still too well guarded."

"Where is he?"

"In there," Dragutin told John pointing at the slaughterhouse. "And I don't think he's alone."

"LaCroix," John stated. "Nick said he knew LaCroix was here."

Dragutin knew exactly what would be happening if Nick in his current state of being was to encounter his Master. He grabbed John by the arm and did something he knew would be risky yet he could think of no other way to get to where he needed to be **that** fast.

The mage performed a blind Teleport into the slaughterhouse.

******

Natalie dared to open her eyes. Toronto looked amazing from a thousand feet in the air. She just wished she was getting the spectacular view from within the safety of an airplane instead of from the arms of The Enforcer who was carrying her. He was being careful - Ron was holding her gently as though she were a small child - but she was still very high up without a parachute or a net to catch her should she accidentally fall free of his grasp.

<*You won't fall*> Natalie heard in her mind.

She looked at the man carrying her. The affection for her she read in his eyes seemed so genuine and so. . . familiar. He wasn't *acting* like an Enforcer. At least, he wasn't behaving the way he did when she first met him last July in Nick's loft. Ron had been a total and complete fiend - more LaCroix's type of creature - but now he was acting almost. . . human. It was really weird.

"How much farther?" she asked.

<*We are close. I can* ***feel*** *him*>

"Nick?"

<*Yes. And others*>

Natalie grew a little less tense. The Enforcer's gaze was cast downward at a group of buildings that looked like warehouses. They then began to make a quick descent. . . .

******

Dragutin and John just *appeared* in an open area that looked like it was used for packaging. The mage turned and John also looked to see what had caught Dragutin's eye.

"LaCroix!" John called out shocked by the sight of Uncle standing there with one bloodied arm supporting his wounded belly looking at both of them with murder in his eyes.

"So, ***you*** are responsible for this!" LaCroix hissed.

"The boy had no part in Nick's transformation," Dragutin stated. "Your quarrel is with ***me***, if you dare to pursue it."

"What have you done to my Nicola, wizard?" he demanded.

"He is unharmed," Dragutin assured him. "But I need to know where Romulus is in order to reverse the magick that altered Nicholas."

"He flew off to find Lavinia," LaCroix said in a venomous tone. "I gather you serve that wench as well?"

"I serve no Ancient," Dragutin replied coolly. "Romulus needed me to accompany him on this assignment. But aiding him in any personal vendettas was *not* a part of my arrangement with him."

"But you *did* help him, whether you wanted to or not," LaCroix stated.

"I know," Dragutin replied. He glanced at John and Sent <*Find Nick. Go to the airport. If he's determined to get to Lavinia, he'll be there trying to book the first flight he can to New York*>

<*I thought Ron-Romulus was in Torpor!*> John Sent back. <*What is going on?*>

<*Long story - I will explain after you get Nick back here. Just go. Now!*>

John flew off.

Dragutin approached LaCroix saying, "I am not a part of your quarrel with either Romulus or Nick. And, although I am not an Enforcer, while on this mission, I am bound by the Code they are sworn to uphold. You cannot pursue your vendetta against Nick or Romulus while I am here. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Now, let me take a look at that cut. . ."

*****

Romulus/Nick saw someone familiar hovering in the sky not too far from his position. Natalie saw the figure also and she recognized him immediately.

"Nick!" she called.

Nick saw them and his eyes glowed red in reaction to seeing The Enforcer. He moved with unnerving speed for the nearest rooftop. The Enforcer followed him down.

Romulus landed within a short jog of Nick. He released Natalie, who, if she could have, would have flown into Nick's waiting arms. Nick was no longer Manifesting his Vampiric nature - he looked his normal *human* self - but Natalie could *tell* something was very wrong with him.

"Nick, what's going on?" she asked.

"It's over, Nat," he told her, his voice betraying his exhaustion. "The Enforcers have the killer."

"Nick. . . what happened to you?"

The Enforcer approached Nick and Natalie. His green eyes were hard as emeralds as they bored into Nick. "You son of a bitch," he swore, his voice coming out a harsh whisper. "I trusted you! And you, John and that wizard all deceived me! I want you to ***UNDO*** what you did. I want my body and my life back!"

Natalie looked at the Enforcer and then back at Nick. "What's he talking about?" she asked.

"Tell her!" The Enforcer barked.

Nick looked at Natalie. "I'm not Nick. He is."

"**WHAT?**"

"The spell Dragutin did that was supposed to make Nick human in reality allowed Nick and I to change places. He's me and I'm him."

"Who are you?"

"Romulus, but the name mortals know me by in this era is Ron Karren. I'm an Enforcer, as you know, but I'm not like the others you have met. I'm. . . a specialist."

Natalie looked at The Enforcer and told him, "Look, I *want* to believe you but I need proof that you really *are* Nick."

The Enforcer's green eyes were twinkling as he replied, "Only the *real* Nick would know that the best defense against a vampire attack is garlic-buttered popcorn."

Natalie remembered the night they spent together watching old movies when she had used the "garlic-buttered popcorn" as a defense against Nick when he'd Manifested at her scaring her. He had only been fooling around when he Vamped out at her that night but she had been genuinely scared for a few seconds. It was when Nick did things like that she was reminded of the sad fact that the man she loved was not an ordinary man. . . .

She looked at The Enforcer saying, "I believe you. But how do we get you back where you belong?"

"That's *his* job," Nick/The Enforcer said looking at Romulus/Nick.

"No, it's Dragutin's," Nick/Romulus stated. "I'll. . . I'll try to find him. I'm also going to find John. I'm going to need his help as well. . . ."

******

John found Nick/Romulus within seconds after getting his Summons. He landed on the rooftop and approached the trio uncertainly.

"Nick?" he asked looking at The Enforcer.

The Enforcer nodded. "Yes, I'm in here. And your Master is in my body. Where is Dragutin?"

"He's coming and he's bringing LaCroix. Apparently LaCroix wants to be here when Dragutin reverses the body swapping spell. He thinks it will be, and I quote, "fascinating"."

"He wants to kill me," Romulus/Nick stated. "But he won't do that as long as I'm in Nick's body. The minute I have my real form back, I'm dead."

"Personal vendettas-" John began.

"I know!" Romulus/Nick interrupted. "But since when has The Code ever stood in LaCroix's way?" John made no answer and Romulus/Nick continued, " John, take this-" he handed John the micro-cassette recorder- "to Lavinia. Now. It's my only chance."

"What's on here?"

"The key to my freedom," he replied. "And, once I'm free, *you* will be free as well. When Lavinia said I would be responsible for you, she in essence made you my childe, which means, in our world, that as long as you are in my keeping, my fate is your fate. And, once I'm released from my Bond to The Enforcers-"

"I'm free of The Enforcers as well," John finished for him.

"Exactly."

"I'll take this to Lavinia. Will you be all right?"

"Yes. Now, get going! Hurry!"

John shot skyward and, the second he was out of sight, Nick/Romulus slumped to his knees exhausted. The Enforcer/Nick gasped in response to what he saw happening to his body. Blood was oozing out of his nose, ears and bloody tears were slowly coursing their way down Nick/Romulus's pale cheeks and his breathing was very labored. Natalie was alarmed by how quickly Nick/Romulus's health was deteriorating and left The Enforcer/Nick's side to see if there was anything she could do for Nick/Romulus.

Nick/Romulus felt the warmth of her touch and he kissed the hand that had reached out to aide him. "You can't help me," he whispered. "I've burned this body out. I was using all my Ancient powers forgetting that Nick didn't possess the resilience to fuel the abilities I draw on so often that they are second nature. Pray Dragutin gets here soon for he is the only one who can save Nick now. . . ."

******

Dragutin and LaCroix found the rooftop where Nick, Natalie and The Enforcer had stopped to converse. Nick was unconscious lying with his head cradled in Natalie's lap and The Enforcer was kneeling next to them. Dragutin didn't like the looks of things and he was the first to get to Nick.

The mage knelt beside the unconscious detective asking, "How long has he been unconscious?"

"Only a minute or so," Natalie replied trying to keep her fear from showing. "He said he burned Nick out by using his powers too much. You *can* help him. . . right?"

"Yes," Dragutin assured her and, looking at The Enforcer, said, "I'm going to have to cut a few corners here in order to reverse the spell in time to save Nicholas. This is *not* going to be pleasant."

"How bad is it?" The Enforcer/Nick asked.

<He's close to Final Death> Dragutin Sent. *<I'm telling you this because you have the option of not going back. It's because of him your body is nearly spent. You could live on where you are. It may take you a while to adjust to the new form but it is a far more powerful one than the body you will have lost>*

<But I won't be me,> The Enforcer/Nick Sent back. *<This body is Bound - I can* ***feel*** *it - and I can't live on that way. I'd rather die a free man that go on as an Ancient's slave.>* He shot the mage a very determined look Sending, *<I'll take my chances.>*

Dragutin sighed deeply nodding that he understood. Natalie knew something transpired between the two men but wasn't sure what. LaCroix had overheard everything - the duo weren't Shielding their conversation - and, although he said nothing, it was obvious he agreed with Nick's decision to try and regain his true form, no matter what the cost. He could understand Nick's desire to be himself again. After all, his Nicholas was such a pretty creature. . . !

The mage rested one hand on Nick's brow and the other on The Enforcer's shoulder and began an incantation in a language alien to all save LaCroix. As Dragutin spoke the words in a sing-song almost hypnotic fashion, Natalie thought she saw a ghostlike thing escape from Nick's body and a similar entity leave The Enforcer as well. The wisps swirled, ebbed and flowed for a few seconds before switching places - Nick's ghost went to The Enforcer and vice-versa.

Once the switch was complete, The Enforcer broke away from Dragutin and shot a look of challenge at LaCroix.

LaCroix had Romulus in his grasp in an eyeblink. His eyes were glowing red with his suppressed anger as he spoke, "I should destroy you but I made a promise to obey The Code. You live. . . for now, Romulus. However, I want that recording device."

"It's gone," Romulus told him and LaCroix *knew* he was telling the truth. The two men glowered at each other for a long moment and, realizing there was nothing more either of them could do under the circumstances, LaCroix released Romulus. The second he was free, Romulus flew off at maximum speed.

Nick's Master joined Dragutin at his childe's side. LaCroix touched Nick, whose skin felt cold and damp beneath his warm fingers, and tried to Read him. Nick's mind was an open book - what he expected to find - but his thoughts were nonexistent. His "son" was in Torpor - the one state of consciousness not even *he* could Read into - and he sighed contemplatively.

"Now what?" Natalie asked.

<*He needs blood - the more potent the better*> Dragutin Sent to LaCroix.

<*Take the mortal away.* ***I'll*** *attend to Nicholas*> LaCroix responded.

Dragutin knew of the old feud between the Nick and his Sire. It was not against The Code for LaCroix to destroy Nick - a Sire could slay his progeny if there was just cause. But Nick had not done anything wrong, he had been a pawn in Romulus's game, and Dragutin knew LaCroix was aware of Nick's innocence. However, *proving* Nick was not responsible for what happened would be difficult. If LaCroix ever wanted the perfect reason to rid himself of his troublesome childe, then he now had it and with it the right to perform a Rite of Destruction on Nicholas.

The mage *felt* the light brush of someone else's mind in his own and caught LaCroix studying him like he was a slide under a microscope. <*Take the good doctor home, Dragutin. And tell her that Nicholas will be expecting her tomorrow.*>

<*You aren't going to kill him?*>

LaCroix looked genuinely hurt by the question. <*No. What fun would that be?*> He smiled slightly as he saw Dragutin's eyes reflect the fact that he *knew* what the Ancient vampyre was talking about. <*Yes. . .* > LaCroix Sent his eyes catching the mage's for a brief instant. <*The look on Nicholas's face when he awakens to see me there brooding over him like a mother hen and then discovering it was* ***I*** *who saved his life. . . .* >

"Thank the gods I won't be there to see it," Dragutin stated fully understanding now *why* Romulus was so intent on destroying this creature. He took Natalie by the arm, "I will take you home. In a day you can visit Nicholas. By then he will be revived."

"By *him*?" she queried shocked.

"Yes. Come with me now." he said sweeping her up in his arms so quickly she had no chance to argue and flew off.

In her mind Natalie heard him say, <*Nicholas will be all right. Let me try to explain everything. . .*>

******

John made it to Lavinia's penthouse in time to beat the sunrise. He had flown there under his own power - that much he was sure of - but how he managed to get from Toronto to New York in a fraction of the time it took an Air Canada flight to make the same trip he couldn't say. The only thing he *could* say was that every time he looked down at the ground it was like watching a slide show, the images would keep snapping and shifting from one locale to the next.

The Ancient was still awake and her personal Enforcers quickly relieved John of his weapon before allowing him into Lavinia's salon. She smiled and motioned to him to approach her with a graceful sweep of her arm.

"Well?" she inquired in a languorous tone.

"The murders were committed by a vampiress and her childer. The vampiress, Alexandra, is in custody. Her childer were destroyed by Romulus."

"Where is Romulus?"

"I don't know. I *think* he is on his way. He was wounded. Dragutin was with us on the mission. I think he is with Romulus looking after him. They should both be along. They have Alexandra."

"How badly injured was he?"

"I'm not a doctor. . .yet," he said and she raised an eyebrow questioningly and he added quickly, "I was a premed student when the Aberat thing happened to me. But it must have been pretty bad if Romulus was thinking he might go into Torpor."

John was sure he caught a flicker of emotion and her placid eyes seemed to mist over for a fraction of a second. Romulus had told him that he and Lavinia were *involved* at one point but it surprised John to see the Ancient showing any feeling for her Enforcer -especially an Enforcer who had been Bound to her as punishment for breaking The Code.

"When did Dragutin think they would return?"

"I never spoke to him. Romulus ordered me on ahead. He wanted you to listen to something he had recorded. He said it was vital you heard it."

"Play it for me, then," she commanded and John took out the microcassette recorder and played the tape.

Lavinia was outraged - she had been tricked! What angered her even more was that alone she could not stand up to LaCroix. Her Enforcers would even be hard pressed to take him on. He had defeated them in the past. LaCroix had withstood days of torture at the hands of Enforcers rather than submit to an interview with the Vampire Archivist. Although those who protected the Archivist were not the most powerful to serve as Enforcers, they were more than a match for any ordinary vampire.

But LaCroix was ***not*** an ordinary vampire. . .

She sighed thoughtfully. "I should have believed him when he said he was innocent. But at that time his claims Read false. I had no choice but to condemn him."

"When he returns you can rectify the situation."

She smiled slightly at John. "Believe me, childe, I intend to." John sighed inwardly relieved. Lavinia *felt* his emotional release and said, "So, you care what happens to your adoptive Sire?"

"I. . .well, yes, I do care." John stammered unsurely. He did like Romulus. Not like they were best friends or anything but Romulus did lay his butt on the line

for him and John appreciated what the man had done on his behalf and they did get along for the most part. "He's not like what I thought an Enforcer would be," John added. "Yeah, he does the job, but he's, well, *different.*"

"Different?"

Lavinia jumped imperceptibly at the sound of the familiar voice but Romulus caught her involuntary action and, giving her a wise guy grin, cracked, "Honey, I'm home!"

"We are not amused," she said sharply but her eyes were smiling.

"Your men are holding Alexandra. She is outside awaiting your pleasure," Romulus stated matter-of-factly.

"Good," she said. "But I have business with you first."

Romulus looked at John and John nodded yes. Lavinia caught the exchange and told him, "I heard the recording. I am not in a position right now to act against LaCroix. However, I can undo the injustice done to you. When Dragutin returns, the Bond holding you to be severed and you will be free to do as you will."

"What if my "will" is to stay on and work with you?"

"I thought you despised being an Enforcer!"

"The work was not what I objected to, but the conditions under which I had to do the job."

"You will stay when you are free?" she asked hopefully.

"Let's just say I'll be around if you need me," he replied his expression intimating that he had needs other than those involved with upholding the Code in mind.

Lavinia caressed his cheek with her hand. "Believe me, Rom, my old friend, I *will* be calling you. . ."

*****

Nick sat up in bed with a start. The sun had just set and he nearly had a conniption when he saw how late it was. He had ten minutes to report in and there was ***no way*** - even with his ungodly vampiric speed - that he could shower, shave, dress and drive himself to the precinct in that short span of time.

"Drive! The car! Oh shit, I left it at the warehouse!" Nick swore to himself then stopped as it dawned on him he didn't remember half of what had happened last night. "At least I *think* I left it there....?" He quickly grabbed the cordless phone by his bed and dialed the station.

"Knight, where the hell are you?" Schanke demanded. "What happened to you yesterday?"

"Do you have the Caddy?"

"Yeah, it's here. Now, *where the hell are you?*"

Nick looked around. He wasn't home, that much he could tell but where he was he had no clue. He *sensed* someone coming and said quickly, "Look, I have to go. I'll try and get there ASAP."

Nick hung up the phone before Schanke could chew on him any more and was just in time, too. The door to the bedroom opened as he was putting the receiver on the cradle.

"Wise of you to call in, Nicholas," LaCroix purred. "You *are* going to be late. **VERY** late."

Nick was out of the bed in an eyeblink. He could not leave the room. LaCroix was blocking the way to both the door and the lone window - the only escape routes - but *something* told Nick that running wasn't his only option. . . .

"What do you want?" Nick demanded.

"I thought I raised you to be a little more courteous, Nicholas," LaCroix replied approaching Nick slowly. "You could at least show *some* gratitude. I did just save your life."

"Where am I?"

"Toronto, not too far from that place where you work."

Seeing what looked like an opening, Nick bolted for the door but he didn't get three paces. LaCroix caught him easily and, as he stood behind Nick, holding his childe securely and in such a way that Nick's hands were immobilized (he was taking no chances - Nick might just be clever enough to figure out how to manifest those wolflike claws his brother Romulus had used while in Nick's body), and he said, "Aren't you the least bit curious about last night?"

"What did you do to me?"

"I told you - I saved your life. That fiend Romulus nearly destroyed you. If I hadn't intervened, you would be dead now."

Nick remembered what the Enforcer had done - the body swapping and the time he lay trapped and helpless in Romulus's damaged form - but what had his Master done to rescue him? He dared to look at LaCroix and, when their eyes met, LaCroix Sent Nick everything. A flood of data was downloaded into Nick's brain at such a rate it hurt like a metal stake being driven through his skull. Nick screamed in agony before the darkness of unconsciousness overtook him.....

*****

Natalie stopped by the loft after getting Schanke's message. He said Nick sounded very out of it and Natalie was worried. Dragutin had *NOT* wiped her memory of the past night's events - the mage had allowed her to keep her recollections of what happened even though it violated The Code. He understood her relationship to Nick, even though he did not hold much hope for her finding a cure for vampirism, and he had left her at her doorstep with nothing more than a blue rose and his oddly luminescent card to remember him by. . .

Dragutin was a mysterious, intriguing (and handsome!) fellow, Natalie mused as she entered Nick's place. Why is it always my luck that whenever I meet an attractive man he winds up having something about him that makes him completely unattainable! I fall for Nick, he's a vampire! Dragutin is a wizard and I'm not so sure that's all there is to him. With my track record, the next dreamboat that pulls into this port will probably be a werewolf!

She sighed to herself as she slid open the heavy front door. Nick was passed out on the couch with an afghan tucked loosely around his slender shape. He had not fallen asleep with a bottle in his hand - something she has seen him do *too* many times - and his eyes were open by the time she was at his side.

"Natalie?" he queried sleepily. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking up on you," she told him. "Schanke was worried. It's not like you to call in late and then never show up!"

"I'm sorry about that. I'm just so wiped out."

"I know," she replied quietly. "Dragutin told me to expect this. He also thought I should give up trying to cure you but I think you can guess what I told him about that!"

Nick grinned. "Yeah." He sat up asking, "You bring me another one of your concoctions?"

Natalie shook her head. "We'll put you back on my witch's brews when you are feeling better. Right now, drink this." She pulled a bag of blood out of her medical bag and handed it to him. Nick took it from her but just let it rest there on his lap. He had no desire to consume it - he wasn't hungry at all - but he *did* want to go back to sleep.

Natalie must have sensed what was on his mind because she said, "Okay, sleepyhead, I'll see you tomorrow night. By the way, the serial murder case was closed today. Agent Dencoff phoned to let us know they have the suspect and enough evidence to get a conviction. We'll be getting a report from him over the wire sometime today."

"Bring me a copy, okay?"

"No. You eat and rest. Doctor's orders. You'll see it when you come back to work, understand?" He nodded, his blue eyes twinkling with untapped mischief, and she added, "I'm serious, Nick. Back to bed."

"Tuck me in?" he asked in his best child's voice.

"Oh, you men are all alike!" she commented as she followed him up the stairs. "Get so much as a sniffle and you regress to infancy!"

"If that was true, I'd be asking you to bathe me!" Nick teased.

"I bet you'd love that!" she retorted.

He gave her a naughty look saying, "Not half as much as *you*!" and he was *gone* before she could utter a word to defend herself.

Not that she had any defense against the truth....

******

Foolish mortal, LaCroix thought as he hovered invisibly by the loft window. Always wanting what they can never have. . . .

<*Mortals are not the only ones who covet, Old One*> a familiar voice Sent.

LaCroix turned towards where he Sensed the man to be but he could not see him. <*Wise of you to Obfuscate yourself, wizard. Making sure I honored our agreement?*>

<*You have never been one to inspire trust, LaCroix.*>

<*And you and your line of shiftless spellcasters are not exactly revered by The Community.*>

<*We have our place.*>

<*Yes, but do you know it?*>

Dragutin ignored the jibe. <*Leave Nick alone.*>

LaCroix flew off away from the window and came within range (he thought) of Dragutin. <*As you wish. I have an eternity to play with Nicholas. And, after last night, he is one step closer to becoming ready to return to the fold. . . .*>

The wizard understood what LaCroix was intimating. No, Nick was not Bound to him yet but would he be if he were to drink his Sire's blood one more time. To drink the blood of one's Maker three times on three different nights was one guaranteed way of creating a Blood Bond. Nick had drunk of LaCroix twice - once when he was brought across and last night was time number two.

As Dragutin flew off for home, he hoped Nick would never again be put into a position where he would have to rely on LaCroix to "save" him. . . .

THE END?

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